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THE RUT

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THE RUT

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I

IN THE RUT

It was her forty-third birthday, the twenty-fifth anniversary of her marriage. Her Silver Wedding Day! How old that made her appear! And yet, she was really hardly middle-aged, and so much younger looking than most women of her years. Certainly, she had grown a little stout, her step had lost its early buoyancy, and there were lines, a few fine-pencilled lines, about the corners of her kindly eyes. Still, considering the four children, and the housework, and all the time devoted to the Chapel, she was very well preserved. But—*well preserved*—no, what a terrible phrase! And one, after all, that did not meet the case. She had never had recourse, like other women, to artificial aids to keep her comeliness. Massage! it was almost a sin to her strict code, apart from the lack of time and money for it. Her healthy,

rosy cheek owed all to nature ; her abundant chestnut hair, falling softly on each side of the low, sweet brow and drawn with a pleasant wave into neat coils, was as yet unflecked by a single silvery thread ; her round, blue eyes maintained their childhood's look, and her red lips parted over perfect teeth.

She had cause to be satisfied with her appearance, to be satisfied with herself and her surroundings, and she smiled her simple, kind, complacent smile at the comely face looking back at her from the glass.

It was the mirror on her dressing table, a fine, substantial piece of furniture. The flawless glass, with deeply bevelled edges, swung, perfectly poised, between fluted mahogany columns, and all the other furniture in the bedroom corresponded. It bore the stamp of a day long since gone by ; a stamp of solidity and sterling value, of comfort, security and dignity, product of calm, complacent, level minds, unteased by theories and uncertainties. Although it belonged to an earlier period, being inherited from Dolly's mother, it was not out of place in its present

home, where traditions passing away from modern life remained installed in their old, accepted shrines.

Like the rest of the house, the room was spotlessly clean, immaculately neat. There was not a thread, not a pin on the Axminster carpet; not a wrinkle on the white lace coverlet, which was taken off and folded every night, when the maid turned down the bed. This perfect order was not adventitious. Say, rather, it was her daily martyrdom. Disorder, moral or physical, dismayed her. Re-adjustments stirred in her soul revolt and protest. That all things should occupy appointed places; all days fulfil appointed task and duty; all men, obeying one appointed law, move by appointed roads to goals appointed, nor, even by unwary thought or glance, give hostage to havoc opportunity—this was her rule, philosophy, religion. It had brought her, contented, calm, unspeculative, to this twenty-fifth year of happy married life.

She finished fastening her brown silk dress, pinned into the lace front the small gold brooch she had worn on her long-past wedding

day, and gave a final pat to her glossy coils. That was merely an excuse to handle her new brushes, the silver backed brushes that lay on the silver tray before the glass. The brushes had been her husband's gift that morning. The children, among them, had bought the silver tray. None of your modern art things —solid stuff! a mass of scrolls and flowers and doves and cupids which defied all canons of simplicity.

"Something to show for your money," her husband had demanded when he bought them. "If I want them plain, I have them wooden-backed."

Dolly too, admired their crowded decoration. She lifted them, smiling, turned them to catch the light, and laid them down, almost reluctantly. Such accessories added to the pleasure of her existence, mainly by adding to its dignity.

While she lingered thus unduly at her toilet, the December afternoon drew to a close. The lamplighter was coming down the street. It was time to light the gas, and draw down the blinds. She remembered she had not

inspected the spare bedroom. She would go at once, before having her cup of tea. Yes, everything had been arranged as she had directed. The green Venetian blinds were already down, the gas had been lit and lowered to a glimmering star, a new cake of scented soap lay in the soap dish, the best, fringed towels depended from the rail. A mat awry on the table caught her eye. She straightened it, and once more looked about her, looked carefully, anxiously, with puckered brow. But, like the creator of a universe, looking, she found that all was very good, and her relief sought utterance in a sigh, a somewhat heavy sigh, as she closed the door.

"Surely, even Martha can't find anything amiss!"

She went downstairs into the drawing-room. There her afternoon tea tray waited on the table, the kettle purring on the spirit-lamp. Here also, order reigned. This room was immediately under her own bedroom, and a large bay window looked on to the street. Heavy rep curtains were drawn across the window, the upper panes of which were

adorned with little squares of tinted glass. The furniture consisted of a suite, and was neatly ranged in stiff, symmetrical line. An overmantel with a centre mirror flanked by hand-painted panels, Patty's work, crowned the marble fireplace, draped with yellow plush. On each side of the overmantel was an incandescent gas bracket, whose opalescent globe enclosed a trembling star that waited but a touch to spring to garish brilliance. That touch was not bestowed. Dolly, having poured the water on the tea, and brought her table close beside her chair, extended her hand with an uncertain gesture, and then, leaving the action incomplete, sat down in a chair and stared into the fire. It was many a day indeed since she had done anything so uncharacteristic.

Dolly Armitage had been married at eighteen, an age at which character may be indicated, but scarcely formed. At eighteen she had been a slender, graceful girl, with much-frizzed, light brown hair, worn in

a fringe, a colour like a field-rose, and eyes almost foolishly blue. She had then, not so fully developed, of course, as later, the love of ordered, calm and punctual days, the tendency to settle in a rut, which spring in part from lack of imagination, but more from knowledge of moral helplessness in face of any unexpected conjunction of events. The loose lips had betrayed it to any close observer. Here was no disciplinarian, no strong controller of her destiny, not even a successful show-woman, to jerk the puppet strings to a tune of her own setting. Here rather, a timid soul relying for its salvation on the monotonous tenor of uneventful days. She might secretly long to adventure beyond her little world; the distant, the unknown might beckon and allure. She had no courage to respond to the appeal. She could never look up a train without assistance.

She liked things to go *just so*, as she expressed it, because, when they did not, it put her "all in a fluster." She lost control, encountering novelty. It was to avoid the "flusters" she detested, that she learned to

shape her life to settled purpose, always choosing the road of least resistance.

Thus her weakness came in time to be her strength; complacently forgetful of its origin, she applauded her very cowardice as virtue.

She still remembered, with a certain terror, the occasions on which her golden rule had failed, the rare events which had flung her to her emotions, as early martyrs were flung to ravenous beasts.

There had been an abortive attempt at boarding-school, occasion of such hysterical despair, that the project had been hastily abandoned. And afterwards she had lain awake at night, magnifying in her childish mind the entrancing wonders of the far unknown; longing to be, by some special miracle, at once a grown-up young lady in that wonder-world of school, and a little girl, safe at home, with her mother close at hand.

There had fallen the terrible blow of her mother's death, an event in which the sense of bitter loss was dwarfed by her discovery of her own unsuspected capacity for suffering. This discovery made her almost fear herself,

as though she had traced in her blood some seed of maligant sickness. Yes, she had passed through moments of emotion, moments she strove to forget, to blot from remembrance, lest even memory should encourage their recurrence.

Her engagement to Arnold Armitage had not been among those crises. That had come about so much as a matter of course that there had been little scope for sentiment. The two families, the Armitages and the Holts, had been neighbours ever since their children could remember. Both fathers were Deacons at Cavendish Square Chapel. Together they had started the P.S.A., so successfully managed now by Dolly's husband.

The Holts had sat just behind the Armitages, in the middle aisle, five pews from the pulpit, as far as Dolly's memory extended. Twice every Sunday, and once a week at the week-night prayer-meeting, she had sat and studied the back of Arnold's head, the long, dark head, carried ever higher and higher, as he passed the common stature of his fellows.

Her father had broken Arnold's wishes to her, speaking very gently for fear of startling her. He would not attempt to put any pressure on her, but referred to his life-long friendship with Arnold's father, to her mother's affection for Mrs. Armitage, to Arnold's sober, reliable qualities, far more enduring than some that dazzled more.

It was very much easier to say Yes than No. She had always known that she must marry some day. How much better her old playmate than a stranger! Marriage came into most lives like a terrible upheaval, or a voyage into some strange and unknown world. It involved an entire re-adjustment of ideas; a change of scene, habits, acquaintances; a parting with all familiar, old, and dear, that must be as the sundering of soul, and body. All this she would be spared in marrying Arnold. She would please her father, please her friends, the Armitages. She would continue to live in Darley Bridge, attend Cavendish Square, keep up her Sunday School Class. She would ask to retain her seat in her father's pew, with Arnold's long dark

head in front of her. Her childish dream seemed realised at last—to go away and yet remain at home.

Her heart was, at that time, like the white page of an unwritten book; a book of which she never fluttered the leaves, lest some unsuspected word should startle her. She quietly put it away in a secret drawer, and did not realise that Life had kept possession of the key and, while the eyes of her soul were closed in sleep, made entries on every page with pale, invisible ink, to start one day into legible hieroglyphs, when the fire of passion should make the meaning clear.

In her courtship then, she had passed through no emotions, had made no fresh discoveries in her heart. The common world became no wonderland; the wonderland showed very commonplace. She had always been fond of Arnold Armitage. She looked for no novelty in this sentiment, though she supposed, since she was engaged to him, her condition was that described as being in love.

He did not attract her into any speculations. She knew exactly how his days were spent,

what were his tasks, hobbies and recreations ; his views on temperance, politics and religion ; how many lumps of sugar he took in his tea. His financial position was modestly secure. His father, a manufacturer of textile goods in the neighbouring manufacturing town of Brockburn, had taken him early into partnership. An only son, he would, in course of time, inherit the business, which had never been made into a company. He passed Dolly's window every week-day morning on his way to the station to catch the 8-15. Every day except Tuesday, which was Market Day, he passed it again, returning to mid-day dinner ; and a third time, generally running, to catch the 1-55. Every evening, except when the mills worked overtime, he made his final return by the 6-18. After their marriage, nothing would be changed. He would continue to walk for the 8-15, run for the 1-55, and get home in the early evening for high tea.

Here was no prospect to stir a quicker pulse. The sentiment of this period was not one of elation or excitement, but one of calm, com-

placent dignity, derived from the prospect of "settling down" in life. Some might have called it settling in a Rut.

But since no phase of existence is entirely uneventful, since there is progression, even in decay, Dolly's courtship had not passed unmarked by ferment. It had been connected with taking Fotheringay Villa.

Arnold had called one Saturday after dinner, and asked her to go for a little walk with him. This was usual and expected. But that day he bore himself with an air of great importance, and walked as one who had a special goal in view. Dolly had been surprised when he turned into Cavendish Road; a long monotonous road of suburban villa houses, each built an exact replica of the rest, with large bay windows on the first and second storeys, a pointed gable, green painted wooden porch, and a privet hedge dividing the tiny garden from the street. Before one of these houses, curtainless and empty, Arnold had paused with gravity and produced a key. He held up the key to Dolly's astonished gaze, and dangled it proudly, as if it

were some wondrous talisman. Then bidding her be careful of the paint, he had unlocked the door, and they had entered. She remembered still the odour of wet paint that greeted them. The rooms had all been papered, the paintwork was nearly dry. A few rolls of paper and buckets of paste and size stood in the kitchen, but, as it was Saturday, the workmen had gone home.

How they had gone from room to room together, silent at first with something of emotion. The occasion was one too solemn for many words, and Arnold was by nature slow of speech.

It was a pleasant house, well built and spacious, despite its desolating outlook on countless duplicates, a feature by no means distressing to Dolly or Arnold who, like many Dissenters, admired uniformity.

There were so many bedrooms.

"Far more than we shall require," said Dolly, naively.

And Arnold, as simply answered, "Just at first: but later, no doubt, we shall have them all in use."

And then, with a pride of possession that throbbed through his gravity,

"My father has bought it, Dolly. It is ours. Do you *realise*, we shall live here all our lives?"

And even then she had been nothing daunted!

No! neither the extra bedrooms awaiting occupants, nor that glimpse of the long perspective of the years had had any power to stir her complacent calm. Only one thing had cast a shadow on her content, one thing she felt she could not speak about, though it brought a choking lump into her throat—she could not *bear* the bedroom wall-papers!

And later there had been the furnishing. With that had been connected an event, a terrible event, concerning which she had long since bade her memory be silent.

Arnold and Arnold's parents had requested that when the time came for furnishing the house, Cousin Martha Schofield should be taken into council. Dolly had met Cousin Martha Schofield frequently and, as strongly as her temperament permitted, hated her.

Before her engagement, it had been possible to avoid her. That fact accomplished, there was no course but to accept her.

Cousin Martha, at that time a spinster of thirty-six, appeared to the bride-elect, with her eighteen summers, the most odious of old maids. She was tall, thin, and flat-chested. She suffered from gall-stones, and frequent biliousness. Her heavy feet were encased in elastic-sided boots. Her hands were painfully red, with prominent knuckles; and she had a trick which exasperated Dolly, of pulling her bony fingers, one after another, to produce a dry, chalky cracking in the joints.

All this might have been pitied or overlooked, but Martha Schofield possessed one characteristic which forced itself on the most unwilling observer.

"My dear," Mrs. Armitage would observe in gentle tones, "I wish you would not do that. *Cousin Martha disapproves.*"

Cousin Martha disapproved of everyone. Her disapproval was rooted in her nature, and germane to her as her biliousness. It was, indeed, a kind of moral gall-stone. In the

almost magnificent breadth of its impartial sweep it embraced everyone who appeared on her horizon. But in each individual case, she had "good reason for it."

She disapproved of Mr. Armitage, because he *would* fall asleep after Saturday dinner, and the fact was evidence of over-eating—besides, so unseemly, snoring before the housemaid. She disapproved of Mrs. Armitage, because she had an early cup of tea taken up to her every morning before she rose; and *she* had never given in to luxuries. She disapproved of little Dolly Holt, because she "frizzed her hair like an Islander, and wore as many trinkets as a squaw." She disapproved of Dolly's father for letting her make such an object of herself. She disapproved of all impartially for not belonging to the New Connection.

No one would ever dream of defying her. When Cousin Martha came to Silverdale, Mrs. Armitage gave up her morning cup of tea; Mr. Armitage went for a walk after Saturday dinner, or visited his old friend Mr. Holt, and slumbered peacefully in his smoking room.

Even Dolly, the bride-elect, was very gently asked, as a special favour, to smooth her fluffy fringe into sleek submission. Cousin Martha ruled unquestioned, for she ruled with a rod of gold. In her heart she sneered at her cringing relatives; sneered, but would not have had things otherwise.

Arnold alone enjoyed the doubtful honour of being Cousin Martha's favourite. Certainly, he never presumed on this position; he managed her tactfully and skilfully. He knew her weaknesses, and, without pandering to them, calculated with a wonderful precision to what extent it was well to appear to yield.

But in his engagement he had made a blunder. He had left it to his mother to announce it, and had not even consulted her beforehand. He stood in serious danger of estrangement, at a time when he trusted most in her alliance. He rebuked himself for such mismanagement. With a little, a very little adroit manœuvring, he might so easily have persuaded her that the engagement was in deference to her wishes. Now, of course,

that opportunity was lost, and he cast about how to propitiate her. The inspiration came, not in a flash—inspirations never flashed on Arnold's brain—but after nights of anxious wakeful thought. He would ask her to help to choose the furniture. She should have the excitement of furnishing a house, all, barring Dolly's bedroom, already arranged, entirely in accordance with her own wishes. Dolly must be sensible about it.

And Cousin Martha came, immensely flattered, and in no ungenerous mood. She selected and paid for the dining-room furniture without consulting either of the young folk. Even to the mahogany-cased French striking clock that matched the suite, it was complete. But Dolly was not sensible about it. When she saw it, saw it actually installed in her own dining-room, she stamped her foot, burst into a flood of tears, and ran out of the house.

"Your kindness has been too much for her," said Arnold, lying most equivocally.

He went to the window. It was a large square window, separated by the porch from the bay of the drawing-room. Dolly

was desperately struggling with the gate, and weeping, actually weeping, in view of all the neighbours.

"Arnold," said Martha Schofield, impressively. "One hundred and fifty pounds! She is not worthy of it!"

"One hundred and fifty pounds!" said Arnold, staggered.

"Solid, every bit of it; and the very finest horsehair I could buy. It was not easy to find it, I can tell you. They said it was out of fashion, now-a-days. Fashion, indeed!"

"I really can't thank you sufficiently, Cousin Martha. I don't know how to express it."

"What I feel is—that girl! Will she ever live up to it? I always regretted you did not consult me, Arnold. Where's the little fool now, I wonder?"

He turned to the window again, with a pang of recollection and remorse.

"She seems—she's not there. She seems to have gone home."

"The best thing she could do."

"Don't you think I'd better go and see

her a minute? She may have been feeling unwell."

"*Feeling unwell*! Don't you deceive yourself! Don't you begin giving in at the beginning, or a pretty dance she'll lead you, I can tell you. Give me your arm. I'll go home now, and lie down. I can feel I shall have one of my attacks to-morrow."

Dolly had run, run, run, all the way down Cavendish Road. Turning into Cavendish Square, in front of the Chapel, she had made an attempt to pull herself together. She was shaking terribly, but she assumed at least the appearance of control. Arrived at the welcome shelter of her home, she flew upstairs and locked herself into her bedroom, then flung herself face downward on the bed in an agony of tears.

"He did not even come to open the gate!" This was the dart that rankled most bitterly. "He stood at the window and watched me! Oh! I saw him! He might, he might have come! He might have come!"

She repeated the words aloud, time after

time, wringing her fingers till the joints began to crack—augh! Just like that ugly, bilious, horrible old maid.

She sat up and caught sight of her ravaged face in the glass. Her eyelids were terribly swollen; her head ached dolefully; her hair was limp and dishevelled on her forehead. Ah! she remembered! Arnold had actually had the impertinence to ask her, during Cousin Martha's visit, to leave her hair uncurled! Oh, the old cat!—Martha, of course, not Arnold—she would show how much she cared for her disapproval. She lit the spirit-lamp with trembling hands and thrust the curling-tongs into the flame, and frizzed and frizzed the soft brown ends of hair, till they rose up, defiant. Then her hands slipped, the hot iron had seared her forehead. She dropped the tongs with a clatter, burning a hole in the spotless dressing-table cover. And then she flung herself on her bed and wept again.

How she had wept that day, so long gone by! Wept—and it was not for the scar on her white brow, nor the slights and petty insults

put on her, nor the horsehair of her grim new furniture! She wept, because she had looked into her heart, and discovered—Oh, with dreadful clarity!—that she was not in love, never had been in love, with the man she was so soon about to marry.

It had come, that flash of desolating insight, in the moment of her struggle with the gate; the moment that had seemed eternity, when Arnold had stood to watch her from the window, and had not come to her. Why! why! had she not discovered it earlier? Why had she discovered it at all? Now, alas, it was too late! . . . Yes, she knew it was too late. She knew she could never face up to a broken engagement, and all the Chapel people talking of it. . . . . And then the expense everyone had been put to! The house and the furniture, and her bridal trousseau; the ring she had grown so used to on her finger, and the wedding gifts that would have to be returned! Too late! too late! she would never have strength to do it!

She wept despairingly over her impotence;

wept herself into acquiescence with her fate, wept her tired, wounded heart into lethargic slumber ; lived down her secret knowledge of herself.

The marriage had taken place within a month of this event. Already, with averted countenance, Dolly had thrust into their original limbo those Furies which had threatened to destroy her. She tried to forget their dolorous revelations ; persuaded herself it was her duty to forget.

Our physical infirmities have thus much dignity, they bring us no false illusions. The one-eyed man can by no means persuade himself that his vision is clearer than that of his two-eyed brother. But our moral frailties, on the other hand, subtly flatter our self-esteem by posing as virtues. Pig-headed obstinacy goes as strength of will, weakness as amiability, selfish aloofness as philosophy.

Now Dolly, in marrying a man she did not love, might have felt she degraded herself and deceived the man. Not at all. She applauded her sacrifice to friendship, and

her shrinking coldness in their bridal months was, to herself, the triumph of modest virtue. She had read in books of hot, tumultuous passion, ardent kisses, burning fevers of emotion. She knew good women did not experience such feelings, which must be uncomfortable, as well as surely evil. And she thanked her God she was one of the elect.

Her complacence had not diminished, but increased, as years went by. Her married life had been normal, calm, contented. Outward affairs had prospered. Imagination had kept a peaceful sleep. No misfortune had smitten her with a sense of heaven's displeasure. Long since she had quite forgotten that Writing on the Wall. She was used to her husband; maybe fonder of him than many who begin with radiant hopes and quickly fall into grey disenchantment. She had, in short, achieved what seemed to her that state of life most secure and enviable—she had got into her Rut; a deeply-traced, narrow, comfortable Rut, from which she intended never to depart. And she felt it to be a proof of her own virtue, that her life

moved onward smoothly, peacefully, without any ugly jolts or unseemly scrambles. Alas, like so many self-complacent Christians, she had quite forgotten of whom it was once said, *They come in no trouble, like other folk.*

Those twenty-five years had not been without their changes, or rather say their expected developments. The extra bedrooms were duly occupied, with seemly deliberateness. Harold, the eldest son, was born two years after his parents' marriage. At the time this story begins he was, therefore, twenty-three. A thorough Armitage, he had his father's sallow, dark complexion, loosely-built, ungainly frame, and methodical habits. He was a quiet, serious, heavy youth, absolutely without initiative or imagination, but sober, steady and reliable. From a Preparatory School in Darley Bridge, he had gone, in due time, to the Brockburn Grammar School; proved himself plodding, slow and conscientious, but no particular favourite with his class-mates. After a year at a Commercial College, and a few months instruction at a Technical School, he had been taken

into his father's business, to which he turned his attention with restrained enthusiasm. He too, had contentedly settled into his Rut, the traditional family Rut prepared for him. His parents had every ground for thankfulness.

Laura, three years younger than her brother, had turned twenty last November. She also, at any rate during her adolescence, had the physical characteristics of her race. She was tall, over-grown, and of somewhat lanky figure; dark-skinned, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with wonderful lashes. In all other respects, she was a growth apart; but being like her father and brother, slow of speech, she kept the secret of her difference to herself, and none suspected the alien in the nest. Laura possessed, and had the wit to conceal, a truly riotous imagination. She lived in a wonderful world of her own creating, and chafed at each recall to daily life. All things familiar were to her detestable. Reverence seemed lacking in her composition; though perhaps the truth was, it had not yet been evoked by any sufficiently powerful conjuration. In concrete instances these

facts were manifest, and caused her parents some slight perturbation. Laura had refused, for instance, to take a Sunday School Class. She showed no ardent desire to become a full-blown Church member. Her zeal for foreign missions was very moderate, and inspired rather by her interest in the unknown, than by any pity for the unconverted Black. Of late she had passed into the anæmic stage, so common among girls of her age and temperament. She had grown unreasonable and irritable, a far from desirable inmate of the household. Her mother had thankfully attributed to this physical condition all the peculiarities which had hitherto puzzled her. The doctor had insisted on a change; and Laura, after tremendous consultations, had been dispatched for six months to Montreux, where, in a Pension conducted by English ladies, it was assumed she would learn to perfect her mastery of French. The mountain air is known to be beneficial, and Switzerland, happily, is considered a Protestant country. Did it not shelter the illustrious John Knox?

Of this project Cousin Martha had approved; a happy condition, induced by the finest diplomacy. She had approved to the extent of fifty pounds, which fact had simplified many difficult problems.

Oh, Dolly and Cousin Martha had long been reconciled. Dolly had found it difficult at first to forgive the occasion of her agony. But she needs must meet her, and time works many wonders, and it was easier to give in than to resist. And then, there were the children to consider. The air at Fernhead, twenty miles north of Brockburn, was moorland air of bracing quality. And to send the children to stay for a week with Cousin Martha was very much easier and more economical than running off at short notice to the sea, or calling in a doctor for minor ailments. Moreover, though covetousness was a deadly sin, and reckoning on dead men's shoes a vile temptation, Martha *must* leave her property to some one; and she had her bad attacks so frequently . . . it was no use flying in the face of Providence.

So the old, old scars were allowed by both

to skin over ; and when little Harold came, to be Cousin Martha's idol, each of the two, meeting over his cradle, thought that the other had forgotten all about it.

The third child, Patty, was a schoolgirl of sixteen whose real name, Martha, was a tribute to her Cousin.

Patty had come two months before her time, her premature entry on this mortal stage being ascribed to the death of old Mr. Holt, and the shock which that event had caused her mother. As a matter of fact, this had hardly been the case. Many years of normal, placid wedded life, had confirmed Dolly's instinctive avoidance of any undue emotion. Her father's death had not been a shock to her. She had not permitted it to be a shock. She knew quite well what was due to her condition, and she had carried her self control so far as to refuse to look on her dead father's face.

Curiously, she had paid for it ever since by inability to realise her loss, and a consequent inability to grow reconciled with it. Sometimes she felt in a vague, uncertain way, that

her soul, in refusing to be swept with grief, had lost some precious opportunity that all her life would never bring again.

Perhaps however, it had been better so; for the fourth child, Frank, had quickly followed Patty, and had been a delicate baby, somewhat difficult to rear. And very soon afterwards old Mr. Armitage had had a stroke, and retired from active business. He had kept his chair by the fire in the inner office, where his presence was always welcome to his son, to whom his long experience was of value. There he would sit, reading financial papers, and frequently falling into a gentle doze. But of late, a second stroke had greatly aged him. He had grown forgetful and childish in his talk, and almost entirely dependent on his wife, herself a frail and delicate little lady, whose bronchitis grew worse with each succeeding winter.

Already it was a very serious question, what would become of Grandpa, if anything happened to Grandma.

A ring at the door startled Dolly from her

dreaming. In her easy chair, in the quiet firelit room, she had fallen into a kind of waking doze, had evoked, so vividly, the shadowy past, that, being abruptly recalled to the present hour, she felt dazed and almost strange. She found, with surprise, that her eyelids were moist with tears.

"Good gracious! Whatever would Cousin Martha say?"

The very thought sufficed to set her on her feet; urged her to flood the room with garish light, brush the tell-tale drops from her lashes, and wreathe her lips with smiles.

Nor was she a moment too soon. The door-bell had been answered by the maid. Already she heard voices in the hall, and hastened out to greet her visitor.

Harold had met Cousin Martha at Brockburn Station, and brought her to Darley Bridge. Arnold was following by his usual train.

"Well, Dolly," said Martha, pecking at Dolly's cheek, "I can tell you, I'd never have come if I'd have known. What I've gone through in that train, words can't

describe. It's disgraceful, simply disgraceful, the way they shake you. I tell Harold, his father should write to the directors. He's a shareholder. It's his duty to lay a complaint. I know I shall have one of my attacks to-morrow. I can feel it coming over me all the time. The pit of my stomach's that cold, you'd never believe it."

"Have a cup of hot milk," said Dolly, "or a little brandy. It's a good while yet to supper."

"Now Dolly, you know very well I never will touch anything between meals. I've told you before, it's a most pernicious habit. That's how *you've* grown so fatty. And brandy, of *all* things, to think of offering me! I thought Arnold would not have it in the house. I hope you never touch it. Brandy's a habit that grows on middle-aged women. I could just imagine it getting a hold on you."

In absolute silence, Dolly opened Martha's bag, and laid out several little necessaries; for, by this time they had arrived in Martha's room, and she was divesting herself of cloak and bonnet.

"I'll tell you another thing, Dolly," she remarked, with almost startling irrelevance. "I don't think Arnold looks the thing at all. I saw him just for a moment, at the Station, and he gave me quite a shock. You'll have him breaking down, before you know it. Yellow! yellow! turned me to look at him!"

"Arnold has been rather worried lately."

"What! money matters? I told him years ago . . . ."

"No, no! It's nothing to do with business, Martha. It's Chapel folk . . . Mr. Brentnall, the organist. . . . but there, if I told you, it would not interest you."

"Oh well, of course, if you *will* have choirs and organs, and all that Popish nonsense, you may look for trouble, Dolly. It's good enough for me to praise the Lord with the organ his providence bestowed on me, and that is my own tongue."

"If you're ready," said Dolly, "we'll go and sit by the fire. I'm expecting Grandpa and Grandma presently . . . They'll come in a cab, of course," she added on a note of self-defence.

"It would not surprise me, Dolly," said Cousin Martha, settling herself by the fire, with portentous rustling of her ample skirts, "It really would not surprise me in the least, if Grandma should go off now, any minute. And what you'd do with Grandpa I can't think."

Dolly thought of the many vacant rooms at Fernhead, and feeling her way with diplomatic caution,

"Arnold was wondering," she said in a neutral tone, "seeing that Grandpa is so little trouble, if the different members of the family . . . "

"*What* different members of the family? Arnold's an only child, as far as I know."

She fixed Dolly with a penetrating gaze, and the moment's pause was filled by the successive cracking of her joints.

"No," she continued, turning her eyes on the fire, "there's but one home for Grandpa: with his son. And I'm sorry for you, Dolly. He'll be troublesome, I can tell you; self-willed and troublesome."

It was quite a relief when the rest of the party arrived—Grandpa, the wreck of a well-built, stalwart man, dark-eyed, white-haired, with a wandering, childlike gaze, strangely pathetic in its entire contentment; Grandma, a pink and white Dresden Shepherdess, with frail, fine features, eyes of limpid blue, and silvery curls crowned with a square of lace. In her grey silk gown, she looked a gentle dove, while Martha more aptly might have been compared with a lean, dishevelled vulture, bald-pated, and raucous-throated.

Yet the quiet old lady, so retiring in her manner, and appearing only as her husband's shadow, had actually been the prop of the family fortune. Without her ready brain, her tactful counsel, her husband, for all his years of honest work, had never founded the prosperous and flourishing firm of Armitage and Son, nor gained the wide esteem of his fellow-citizens. While, strange to say, Martha Schofield's tremendous personality had accomplished one thing only, the discomfort of her neighbours.

Patty and Frank, in festival attire, con-

tributed to the occasion their note of young exuberance. Their mother, calm and contented, smiled indulgence, while Grandpa laughed aloud in childish glee, and rubbed his hands, delighted at their pranks.

The family assembled at the meal which, in tactful deference to Martha's scruples, was spoken of as supper. Both Martha and Arnold objected to late dinners, considering them affected and new-fangled. But if soup, and fish, and turkey may pass as supper, who will cavil at a name? There were all the adjuncts of innocent enjoyment—speeches by Arnold and Harold, vociferously applauded; toasts, none the less sincere because drunk in water; appreciation, hearty and unfeigned, of the excellent fare the good wife had provided.

"Look, how the old girl guzzles," whispered Frank, aside, to Patty, and indicating his unconscious Aunt. "Wont she have *one of my attacks*, to-morrow!"

Laura only was missing from the board; and—the fact was a proof of her truly alien type—no one except her mother greatly missed her.

To all such festivals, however humble, come pale, pathetic shades, asking remembrance. At every board should be set a vacant chair. It was just as the modest meal drew to a close, as a lull of content and repletion succeeded the merry chatter of active enjoyment, that Grandpa, whose look had been growing more and more vacant, turned on Dolly with a sudden querulousness, in which the note of tears was plainly present.

"I can't think why," he said, "at a time like this, your father is not here. My old friend, Nathanial Holt. I've been wanting to see him, many and many a day. He's *always* so unpunctual."

There fell a general hush.

"John," said Grandma, gently pulling at his sleeve, "you're forgetting, John. Our dear, old friend *went Home*, some time ago."

"I never saw him," said the old man absently. "Went home, did he, my dear? I never saw him."

A strange embarrassment held everybody silent, and Dolly's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears.

The rest of the evening passed very quietly, the old people leaving early, and being attended safely home by Harold. Martha, complaining of headache, retired to bed, and Dolly was glad to follow her example.

As she sat at her mirror, brushing out her hair, her husband, undressing on the other side of the bed, suddenly volunteered the information,

"It's every word true, about Brentnall and Mrs. Varley."

"Arnold! how shocking! What *will* Mr. Varley do?"

"Well, don't let it go any further; I can't believe it—they say he means to divorce her, right away."

"*Divorce* her! What *will* the Chapel people say?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. It's a very bad business. Some of them say she *wants* him to divorce her."

"*Wants* him . . . Whatever for?"

"To marry Brentnall, of course.'

"Oh, dear, how dreadful! What a wicked woman! And to think she was a member of our Chapel, and looked just like other people

—didn't she? I declare, I almost wish you had not told me."

"Such wickedness does go on among ungodly folk."

"But *can* she, Arnold?"

"Can she—what?"

"Why, marry him?"

"After she's been divorced? Oh yes, it's perfectly legal—the law of *this* world anyway. Marry in a Registrar's office, if you can call it marrying."

"I never heard such a thing."

"Why, she'll find many a one to take her side. That's the worst of the whole affair. There's Metcalfe won't hear a word of blame about her—says he wonders it did not happen sooner."

"Mr. Metcalfe holds all sorts of strange ideas, I suppose; always visiting those foreign lands."

"Oh, no doubt he's a decent fellow—worldly though. Ready, Dolly?"

"Just getting in, as soon as I've said my prayers. You can put the gas out, dear."

And so the Silver Wedding Day came to an end.

II.

JOGGING ALONG

Mr. Varley, whose domestic affairs were being debated, not only by Arnold Armitage and his wife, but by most of his rapturously interested neighbours, was a prominent member of Cavendish Square Chapel; a Deacon, and also a Sunday School Superintendent.

Arnold had known him for nearly thirty years; met him continually on Chapel business; seen him, Sunday after Sunday, in his corner seat, his elbow propped on the ledge, his hand behind his ear, a little hard of hearing, attentive and devout.

There had been some demur on his first appointment as Deacon; objection based on his then unwedded state and rather conspicuous attire. For Mr. Varley invariably appeared, Sundays and weekdays, year in and year out, in a suit, very smartly cut, of black and white check, white spats, a grey

bowler hat and monocle; and sporting, whatever the season, a blue gardenia in his buttonhole. The gardenia was sent to him every day by post. That was the only interesting fact about him, his only manner of claim on public attention.

In person he certainly was not prepossessing, his type being strangely at odds with his striking make-up. His brow was narrow, his features were coarsely cut, and his mouth, but ill-concealed by a stubbly moustache, had a strong suggestion of brutality. His chin was covered by a scrubby, pointed beard, which had a way of wagging as he talked; and his beard, like the rest of his hair, was iron grey.

He certainly did not look a religious man. Supersensitive people might have said he hardly looked a good man. But looks can be misleading. Mr. Varley's record was a blameless blank. Whatever anyone *felt*, no one *knew* a single fact to his discredit. He was a man without a history. He had two interests, business and religion, and boasted that he never mixed the two. His business

affairs were known to everyone. He was silk buyer for a leading Brockburn firm, and possessed, in addition, a modest private income. He had many acquaintances, but scarce a friend. He very rarely visited his neighbours, and when he did so, seemed nervous and embarrassed. He never invited anyone to his house, administered by an elderly housekeeper.

He passed the safe and seasoned age of fifty, without doing anything in particular. Then, as if suddenly stung by a madding gadfly, he embarked on a most unusual career, and became an object of interest to all his neighbours.

First, he resigned his post and retired from business, investing the whole of his modest capital in the Tarifa Tramway Extension Scheme. Then, he married a girl, a child, just home from her finishing school.

All Darley Bridge was outraged, scandalised. It was even thought he must resign his post as Deacon. As no one, however, cared to suggest this step, and the culprit appeared unconscious of criticism, he was

permitted to retain his office and carry the plate as usual on Sundays. After all, in marrying, he had cancelled one of the original objections. To his costume everyone had grown accustomed, and—the Lord is not alone in loving a cheerful giver.

Mrs. Varley, very girlish, pretty and affected, addicted to novels and theatricals, did not "catch on" at all at Cavendish Square, though her sweet soprano led the Choir on Sunday. She was rather cold-shouldered, looked on a little askance. Not quite our sort, you know. No one meant to be unkind to the girl-bride, but no one felt very sure about calling on her, since Mr. Varley, in his unwedded state, had never welcomed any visitor. The Minister's wife and the wives of other Deacons paid a state call, punctually returned. After that, she was just dropped. Her slight affectation of frivolity alienated older people from her, while the younger members of the congregation resented her disloyalty to youth in marrying one who counted more than twice her years.

The next phase was the appearance on the scene of Mr. Brentnall, the new organist. Thank heaven, Darley Bridge was not responsible for him! A London snob, long-haired and fine of speech; but one who took captive the barbarian north with dulcet strains of rarest melody. Cavendish Square grew famous in his day. Strangers and pilgrims came, as to a shrine, to hear the wonderful congregational singing, led by a young soprano, sweet and pure, and soaring high with the ecstacy of devotion.

Of course, the instructed reader has already guessed the sequel. There was presently a pretty scandal brewing.

Darley Bridge, as is well known, takes its name from the River Darle, which makes a long detour on its journey to the sea, to nudge the township with a sharp-curved elbow. The Darle, once half absorbed by reedy marsh, which it annually overflowed in early spring, has long been confined between high-flung embankments, which provide a channel for its meandering course, and serve to protect the low lying meadow-

land from any serious danger of inundation. The Darle has never had a chance of flowing clear. In days gone by it was brackish from the bog, in its later period, polluted by soap and dye-works. Still, the surrounding fields are fresh and pastoral. Daffodils deck them in the early spring; there the haymaker wields his scythe in summer days.

Some one met Mr. Brentnall and Mrs. Varley, happily wandering in this green, suburban Arcadia. Some one, of course, discoursed upon the theme. At once it appeared that all his listeners had seen or heard or at least suspected something. And so, while the pair played at Platonic friendship, malicious tongues were employed in their undoing.

In the end it came to Mr. Varley's ears. What then passed between him and his wife no one could possibly know; yet, as usual, everyone seemed completely informed.

That course-cut, brutal mouth, so long attuned to sacred psalmody, suddenly found expression more harmonious, in every vile, degrading epithet that sensual, animal

jealousy could invent, and outraged instinct utter.

The white-faced girl, cowering before the storm, had a moment of physical terror, sharp and sickening. His fierce vituperation passed her by; his vile imaginings failed to sear or brand her. Her youth had been soiled, long since, by his caresses, by the harem existence, legalised by marriage. But she feared a sudden blow, or his fingers at her throat.

She fled his fury; fled, as gossip had it, "just as she was," to the welcome of her friend. And the following day the pair left Darley Bridge.

Public opinion, as usual, was divided. There were few who took such a stand as Arnold Armitage, who held that while nothing excused infidelity, not even infidelity itself justified dissolution of marriage bonds.

Most of the men said they did not wonder at all. The women averred the same, with a different inflection. Nobody felt disposed to champion Brentnall, mainly because he was a "foreigner;" but some who liked to

regard themselves as dogs, considered him a very lucky dog. Armitage thought him a monster of wickedness, a corrupt, immoral, dissipated youth, the product of a God-forgetting age. Horace Metcalfe—but he had lived some time in Paris—shrugged his shoulders and was disposed to pity him; thought the poor Devil had been let in very nicely. Mr. Varley declared his intention to ruin him. He hoped to bring about this consummation merely by filing his petition for Divorce, whereby he designed to produce such evidence as should utterly blacken Brentnall's future career. As the co-respondent in an unsavoury Divorce case, Brentnall would hardly be considered eligible for any such post as that he had just vacated.

For his wife Varley entertained not the least compunction. He gloated over her coming disillusionment.

"Thinks he'll marry her, does she? Let her learn. He's had all he wants of her, and more, I reckon. Let the harlot walk the gutters—that's her place. Walk the gutters and go to Hell, while her fellow starves."

Such sentiments, expressed without reserve, considerably outraged public sentiment, and cost their exponent the sympathy of his neighbours. His friends were shocked by his unchristian spirit. His Minister pleaded for charity, forgiveness; his fellow Deacons urged at least, discretion. He received them with contemptuous bitterness, accused his acquaintances of deserting him, and withdrew from all connection with Cavendish Square. Meanwhile he did not forget to file his petition.

These matters were common talk in Darley Bridge at the time of Dolly's Silver Wedding Day. In her mind, much concerned with these painful and novel events, the two things grew into odd association, the Silver Wedding Day and the Divorce.

The Varley affair indeed had a quite unusual effect upon her. Apart from her genuine distress at such a scandal, it obsessed her imagination. Its psychological aspect haunted her—not that Dolly had ever heard of psychological aspects. She constantly wondered "what Mrs. Varley felt like"—

what she, herself, would feel, in such conditions. She almost succeeded in imagining herself in Mrs. Varley's place. Never before had such an event occurred within the circle of her own acquaintances. Had a bomb-shell burst in the garden of Fotheringay Villa, it might have been more inconvenient for the inmates; it hardly could have produced a greater sensation. Of course, as Dolly knew, such things did happen. One read of them in the papers, and in certain novels. But to think they should happen to anybody real! To people we have known and shaken hands with! It shook the foundations of her moral code, and left her feeling that anything might happen. She did not consider her own position menaced, but she wondered how many of her friends and neighbours were living, as she put it, double lives, which would one day be exposed to obloquy. Incidentally she was relieved that Laura was from home. Laura, her mother felt instinctively, would have been profoundly impressed and interested.

The Silver Wedding Day had other asso-

ciations, all more or less unlucky. Indeed, the emblem of that fateful date might well have been a Janus, double-faced, with smiling aspect towards the calm, contented Past, and menacing frown towards the immediate Future, which certainly hastened to reveal itself neither contented nor calm.

To begin with, Martha had the bad attack predicted by herself on first arriving. It was not even one of her usual attacks; but an aggravated form of her malady, which kept her in bed a week. A selfish and exacting patient, hard to please, she made continual claim on Dolly's time and attention. Between her household affairs, and Martha's whims, Dolly was, as she put it, fretted to fiddle strings.

Moreover, in spite of every care and precaution, Grandma had taken cold going home that night. Martha had known it. She had said she would. Martha alone had her grim satisfaction in it. Grandma, therefore, was laid up in bed; and Grandpa came round every morning to say how she was, and frequently took an hour in saying it. He always expected a glass of hot milk and biscuits.

Last and not least, though no one would have guessed it, Dolly's own condition was very far from normal. She could not think what had come over her. The merest trifle set her "all of a fluster." Her nerves were at the mercy of events; her nerves, which had never before declared their existence. She could only suppose it was her time of life; but she never dreamed of acting on the assumption, of seeking rest and change, and medical advice. Women take self-sacrifice much as a matter of course; and all men laud them for it. Sometimes a very little selfishness might help to avert a great catastrophe.

While thus her normal calm was undermined, the anniversary of her father's death brought its yearly tribute of tender recollections. This wound, as has been suggested, had never healed. Strangely, her mother's death, so passionately lamented at the time, had been invested by the passing years with the sanctified calm of quiet resignation. Not so the other; no lapse of months or years had laid the pathetic spectre of her loss.

Yet, for her father, while he was still alive, Dolly had cherished an unimpassioned affection, cool and normal; and his death had found her able, as has been said, calmly to control undue emotion.

They are only those whom we did not love enough who, with plaintive importunity, break their rest, and return to solicit fading memory. The others, the well-beloved, sleep content, having had the best that we or life can give them.

Whatever the explanation of her emotion, every succeeding anniversary found Dolly more devoted to the dead. She had never failed, however inclement the day, to visit his grave with her tribute of pale, perishable flowers, and imperishable tears.

When she donned her plain black dress that Friday morning, she had an instinctive foreboding that trouble lay ahead.

With the terrible firmness that springs from secret weakness,

"I shall go," she said to herself, "whatever happens."

Her order for flowers had been given the

previous day, and immediately after breakfast they arrived, large white chrysanthemums packed in cotton wool.

She carried the box into the housemaid's pantry, and went to pay her respects to Cousin Martha. Meantime the morning lowered, and the sky grew ominous.

Cousin Martha, haggard in nightcap and flannel wrapper, was sitting up, finishing her Benger's Food. On Dolly's entering, clad in sable robe, she uttered a shriek of brilliantly acted terror.

"Don't tell me!" she said, "don't tell me! I can see it in your face! It's Grandma! I know it is!"

With bewilderment, much less convincing, "*What's* Grandma?" asked Dolly, parrying the thrust.

"I knew! I told you! You would not listen to me! I said that draughty cab would be her death."

"Really, Martha," said Dolly, "I don't know what you mean. Nothing's the matter with Grandma, to my knowledge."

"It's not Grandpa, Dolly? Tell me it is not Grandpa?"

" Of course not," said Dolly, taken off her guard.

" Well, it must be somebody," said Martha, crossly. " You would not go into black simply to give me a turn, and me just beginning to feel myself again."

" You know well enough, it's nothing of the kind. I always go into black on the day my poor, dear Dad . . . "

To her own amazement, Dolly broke into tears.

" I did *not* know," said Martha pettishly. " How could anybody know? I think it's very silly, and I'm sure Mr. Holt would not approve at all, if he could see you. All this repining and grieving for one that has been dead I don't know how long, it's rebellion against the dear Lord's will, it is! Stiff-necked rebellion, Dolly. For goodness sake, do take this tray away! I think my legs will break with the weight of it."

Dolly removed the tray and laid it outside the door; then, returning, fidgetted about the room, and said, in a voice as assured as she could make it,

" I always go up to the Cemetery to-day, and take some flowers to lay on Father's grave."

" I hope," interrupted Martha, staring grimly, " I hope, when the Lord shall please to call me home, *my* death won't be made the occasion of such extravagance. The money spent on flowers, that don't do a creature a pennyworth of good—it makes me sick only to think of it ! Besides, I don't see how you can go to-day. I can't be left alone here for hours and hours, just after the dreadful shock you've given me. My nerves would go all to pieces. And to judge from the way you've been sniffing the last ten minutes, I should say *you've* taken cold. And I know its going to rain, if it does not snow."

" I can take a cab, and I shall be back in no time."

" You can't take a cab beyond the Cemetery gates, and you know what a walk there is, across that stretch of grass. Silly place to have a grave, I call it ; just as inconvenient as can be."

" Father always liked that group of trees."

" He ought to have been more considerate of others. You get your feet wet every time you go. Not to mention the expense it puts you to, cleaning the stone, with all those birds about."

" I think," said Dolly, " I'll be going now. I've put the paper beside you, and your glasses . . . "

" You know Dolly, you could go just as well to-morrow . . . "

" No, I could not, Martha. To-morrow's Saturday. I've all my week-end messages to do."

" Go in the afternoon, and take Arnold with you. It would do him good to stretch his legs a little. I've noticed he is getting exactly like his father, falling asleep in his chair after his meals, and his mouth hanging open, taking all sorts of diseases. I've waked him up myself to warn him of it. Of course I've never had a word of thanks."

Dolly made a sidelong movement towards the door.

To those in possession of an over-bearing

will, its exercise is duty and delight, uninfluenced by argument or reason. This madness thrives on a show of opposition. Martha Schofield's surprise was as great as her annoyance, when she found Dolly set on disobeying her. Had Dolly approached her as a suppliant, she might have graciously given her consent. But thwarted, it became a point of honour to maintain supremacy at any cost. The mere possibility of ignominious defeat had power to react on her physical condition to the extent of causing her actual discomfort.

She groaned deeply and lay down.

" I've always said you were very obstinate, Dolly. Think well what you are doing, considering the dead before the living. You'll be sorry for it perhaps, when my turn comes. You'll know then what you've done."

Terrible threat, fraught with sinister innuendo! In that moment Dolly knew herself defeated; and even while she renounced her innocent project, the sharp patter of rain on the window robbed her sacrifice of merit.

"I'll stay at home if you wish it, Cousin."

"Not on my account, Dolly, not on my account. I told you from the first it was going to rain. Some day, maybe, you'll listen and believe me. I *know* I'm never mistaken, but you young folk imagine you know better. Get me another hot bottle; *and* a hot flannel to put about my middle. I can feel it all beginning over again."

Dolly obeyed her behest, with heavy heart. She would not cry again if she could help it; would not attract fresh comment, wake fresh question. She went to her room to hunt out a piece of flannel, and there her eyes fell on her father's faded photograph. She seized it, and pressed it eagerly to her lips. She broke down utterly, in convulsive sobs. Compelling herself to silence, tearless silence, she knelt by the bed, writhing, and gnawing her fingers, shaken with a tempest of emotion. Not for twenty-five years had such a thing occurred.

A knock at the door recalled her to herself. She steadied her voice to make some intelligent answer; then looked at her face in the glass, and recoiled, dismayed.

" Anyone would think I'd lost my wits. I don't know how it is, the last few months, I've all sorts of feelings I never had before. At my age, a woman should be careful of herself."

With wonderful self-control she tidied her hair, relieved her black dress with a white lace cravat, and sprayed her flushed face with eau-de-Cologne and water.

The flowers she sent with a note, to the Minister's wife. They would do to adorn the Communion Table on Sunday.

" They will keep quite fresh over Sunday," she thought with a bitter pang. " They ought to do. They cost me eightpence apiece."

Then, outwardly calm, she went to Martha's room, and read the paper to the invalid.

She began to feel it might be some relief to have her eldest daughter home to help her.

III

FREE-WHEELERS

Laura was by no means anxious to go home to help her mother. She knew so well what would be expected of her—bed-making, messages, dusting, arranging the flowers; darning socks and getting up her own blouses; Chapel on Sunday, week-night prayer meeting; sewing class, Bible union, foreign missions. She knew the weary routine off by heart, and how she hated it!

The window of her bedroom faced the Lake and opened on the wooden balcony which ran all round the Châlet. At the back, the hill climbed steeply, clad in green, towards the crowning peak of distant Dent de Jaman. The outlook and situation were ideal. Here she found her dream-world suddenly eclipsed by reality transcending all her visions.

At first, the joy, the marvel, caught her breath. One talks, quite idly, of a revelation of beauty. Laura experienced that revelation in all its majesty, its miracle. Like every revelation it confused, it dazzled her. She lost, for a time, all coherent sense of proportion. Returning presently to consciousness, the sense of comparison also wakened in her. She remembered, with shuddering horror, Darley Bridge, the pit whence she was digged, and to which she must return. She remembered; but, essentially primitive, she quickly thrust her memories out of sight, and endeavoured to live entirely in the present. On this account she hated the weekly mail-day, that practical link with an uncongenial world. Hurriedly and with acute distaste, she skimmed the letters she received from home; put them by, meant to re-read them, and forgot.

She had come to a critical period of her growth. Retarded, morally and physically, by uncongenial conditions and ill-health, in every instinct, every faculty, her womanhood was mature—mature, but unemployed,

unrealised. The almost inevitable consequence was reaction, reaction towards morbid, over-excited emotion. As her bodily growth had outstripped her physical strength, so had her imagination outrun experience. Her ignorance left her defenceless against herself.

Outwardly peevish, unsociable, reserved, she was tormented in her secret soul, by thoughts, desires, and distracting intuitions which her Puritian upbringing told her to be wicked. At times she felt herself mistress of a treasure of vast capacity, but without any means of applying it or bestowing. At other moments, crude and ugly thoughts, repellant images of hateful vividness, leaped on her from some obscure hiding-place, and fought like very devils to possess her imagination.

She could not speak of these things to anyone. Her mother had been married at eighteen, and had had no period of moral growing pains. No, there was none in whom she might confide.

Gradually, as her physical health declined,

her moral resistance weakened. She let imagination master her. With recovered health, the morbid habit persisted; its indulgence had become a second nature.

Hers should have been the light of southern skies; she should have sprung from that same ardent soil that rears the olive and the fragrant orange tree. Where huddled white houses climb a terraced hill, she should have grown, half cloistered, early wed, the charge of some Duenna, wise in love, of some grey-haired Confessor, wise in sorrow. But she grew, an alien under northern heavens; child of a race oddly irrational; a race, that, branding passion as a sin, profoundly distrustful of impulse and emotion, yet leaves its daughters, ignorant and unwarned, prey to their own half understood emotions, dupe to the first false guide fate may fling in their way.

This girl, by nature sensuous and ardent, might have become, under other circumstances, a second Teresa of the Burning Heart. But the circumstances lacked. She developed otherwise.

It had been agreed, when she went to Switzerland, that in addition to breathing healthful air, Laura was to polish up her French. Accordingly she took lessons every day, from a nervous Swiss Professor, young and bald, who read with Laura and several other Misses, while an English chaperone knitted in the corner.

Their reading consisted of passages from the classics; very carefully selected passages. The moderns were not considered suitable. It was not the French of Verlaine, nor of Balzac, nor yet of Prévost, and Laura found it very dull indeed.

She had not been in the Pension above a month, when a new arrival completely transformed her existence. On first learning of her advent, Laura was much distressed; for it meant the invasion of her privacy, an event she viewed with deepest apprehension. Hitherto, by singular good luck, she had kept her spacious bedroom to herself; a privilege all the more appreciated, since at home she shared a room with her sister Patty. But for all her fears, Fortune was

favourable. The dreaded invader, far from boring her, enchanted, charmed, stirred her enthusiasm.

Her name was Minna Varenski, her blood half French, half Polish. With such a name, with such an origin, Laura felt at once she could not be wholly tedious. As a matter of fact she was wholly wonderful; romantic, passionate, brilliant, and of magnetic personality.

She must have grown up under curious conditions, for her knowledge of life was extensive and somewhat morbid. Though younger than Laura, she easily took the lead, firing her with new enthusiasms, instructing her in ardent mysteries. She was the adept, Laura was the initiate.

Withal she had a strain of the devotee, a touch of the mystic in her mingled blood. On certain days she was ardently Catholic, told her rosary with passion, and kissed her scapular. Then she would talk, though such subjects were forbidden, of great Cathedrals, groves of marble columns, grey mists of incense, vestments, gorgeous hued; of the

solemn pomp and symbol of the Mass, of the exquisite loveliness of Latin hymns.

But more frequently she was cynical, worldly wise. Her moods were changeful as a chameleon's hue, and depended on the prompting of the moment. She had nothing but gibes for poor Professor Möller, his baldness, his accent, his selected passages. Her own accent was perfect and, loving to talk French, she easily persuaded Laura to converse with her in that tongue.

A whole heap of novels, whose passages were not selected, lay concealed under the linen in her trunk. Laura learned to read French, not the French of her Professor. In time she came to speak with fluency, but always retained a decided English accent. But her understanding was without any accent.

The white-walled bedroom looking towards the Lake witnessed many curious scenes, received strange confidences. There was something neurotic in the association of these girls. The emotions of both were over-stimulated. All day they preserved an

appearance calm and normal; once in their room, presumed to be asleep, their ardent natures took the upper hand. Actually and metaphorically, they took off their stays.

In her letters home, Laura never mentioned Minna. She felt the utter incongruity of any association between the two ideas. She tried to fancy Minna at Fotheringay Villa, but imagination recoiled before the impossible.

"It follows," said Minna, "that you must marry soon. Marry a man who will not sit at home, but one who loves to wander in far-off lands. Thus, and thus only shall we meet again. I could never breathe the air of your Cavendish Road. Be wise," she continued. "Marry not for love. Marry for wealth, for convenience, what you will, but marry so that you gain your liberty—liberty—ah—to join the dance of life, to laugh, to enjoy, to meet the destined lover!'

Small wonder that England, home and duty held no lure!

At Fotheringay Villa, events were jogging

on, in the old accustomed Rut, at the old accustomed pace. One day so closely resembled its predecessor, Life seemed as though ambling in an aimless circle, rather than moving, with majestic leisure, to some far-seen inevitable goal.

Martha Schofield, having gained her point, had picked up health with great rapidity. On Saturday afternoon she went for a little walk; on Sunday she announced her quite unexpected intention of accompanying the family to Chapel. Dolly received this mark of condescension with secret consternation. She had hoped for a day of rest, a change of thought, a short release from Martha's exacting whims. Vainly she urged the charms of a morning in bed; Martha persisted in her determination. Dolly had to leave all her little household affairs to assist the invalid to rise and dress.

The pew just held the family comfortably, and Laura being away, there would be plenty of room for Cousin Martha. On this point Dolly expected no inconvenience; but she dreaded, in advance, Martha's inevitable

comments on the sermon. The whole family mustered in the dining-room, where hymn-books, and collection threepennies were distributed by Arnold. Then they set forth; Patty and Frank in front, Dolly and Martha following, Arnold and Harold bringing up the rear. The two children maintained a whispering conversation, subdued by the fact that it was Sunday morning and Aunt Martha close behind. Moreover, Frank was wearing a silk hat, the security of which any sudden movement menaced. He bore himself, therefore, with grave propriety. Harold and his father, frock-coated, and likewise silk-hatted, were discussing the programme of the P.S.A. Occasional snatches of their conversation were borne to Dolly's ear. Martha Schofield, complacent beyond her wont, kept up a flow of almost amiable small talk, to which Dolly found curious difficulty in responding. She felt so tired, so strangely, deadly tired. It was not so much physical fatigue, as a kind of mental and emotional exhaustion. She wondered how she was to get through the day; she almost wished she could stay away from Chapel.

Advancing in this formation, they reached the Chapel, shook hands with the Deacon on duty at the door, and were proceeding decorously down the aisle, when the whole cavalcade was thrown into disarray by the unexpected halt of Frank and Patty. Mr. Armitage frowned and signalled to advance. Frank, after mouthing voiceless syllables, was beginning the deaf and dumb language on his fingers, when his mother discouraged the happy inspiration. Then, disdainfully, he marched into the pew, and the crux was evident.

The corner seat was already occupied. A fair-haired gentleman, with clean-cut, clever profile, blue eyes, and waxed moustache, and alert, athletic figure, was seated, much at his ease, and unconscious of intruding. At a nod from his father, Harold took a seat elsewhere. Aunt Martha fixed her glasses and glared at the intruder, but just at that moment the hymn was given out. Dolly whispered to Frank to give Mr. Metcalfe his book, and look on with his sister Patty; an arrangement entirely pleasing to Frank and Patty.

As soon as the hymn was over, her thoughts were again distracted; this time by the recollection of her flowers. There they were, straight before her, on the plain, wooden table which, flanked on each side with a high-backed wooden chair, stood immediately below the pulpit. Her thoughts took a mournful, almost morbid direction, and her blue eyes filled with tears. It was rather a relief to give her emotion vent, to feel the slow drops quietly overflow. No one observed her; all heads were bowed in prayer. She sat there feeling completely isolated. Some instinct presently caused her to turn her glance in the direction of Mr. Metcalfe. The two children separated her from him; their heads bent forward on the back of the next pew, they maintained by signs and glances some secret intercourse. Beyond them, Mr. Metcalfe sat in his corner, bolt upright, open-eyed, staring fixedly before him. There was no suggestion in his attitude, of prayer. She gave an instinctive start, seeing him so wakeful, and the movement shook two tear drops from her lashes. They rolled slowly down her

cheeks. At the same moment, Mr. Metcalfe turned, perceived her emotion, and quietly averted his gaze. She closed her eyes, bent forward like her neighbours, and furtively drew her pocket handkerchief. When she ventured a stolen glance in his direction, Mr. Metcalfe was sitting exactly as before, staring before him, his white brow slightly furrowed with a frown. She closed her eyes again, heaved a deep sigh, and joined with the congregation in repeating the Lord's Prayer.

Horace Metcalfe who, after almost five years' absence, had recently returned to Darley Bridge, was a specimen, almost a super-specimen, of a type not uncommon in provincial circles. He was the fine flower of the examination system; the outcome of modern, so-called education, grafted on an original stock of retail trade—of very small retail trade. His father an H-less, but otherwise innocuous person, had kept a hardware shop in Darley Bridge. Horace, hopefully named after an American uncle, had mastered the elements of education at the village National School.

He had gone by the name of 'Ardware, likewise that of Pots an' Pans. Since retaliation was always possible, he had not troubled to avenge the insult. But when better times and a Scholarship permitted his removal to the local Grammar School, he was much annoyed to find the soubriquet pursue him. Small, pale, and wiry, unskilled in fisticuffs, he presented all the money he possessed (ten and sixpence, and a French shilling) to a one-time Colour Sergeant, then retired, in return for boxing lessons. It was the finest investment he ever made, and one which he never had any cause to repent. An epidemic of bloody noses following, the opprobrious epithet was quickly dropped; more, he became the champion of the school, and soon assumed the strut of the cock of the midden.

It was then he registered a secret vow, never, never, under any circumstances to go into the shop. This end in view, he applied himself to study with a most remarkable assiduity. He thought that, by paying for his own education, he could persuade his

father to let him become a scholar, a student in one of the Universities. In keeping himself, he bought off his servitude. At least, such was his hope. He continued to take Exhibitions, and keep up his boxing-lessons. After passing two years in this exemplary fashion, he broke his own record by taking a Scholarship for Brockburn Grammar School. He left to Darley Bridge the legend of his exploits, and prepared to adapt himself to new surroundings. His father raised the one dissentient murmur. He grudged the expense of the third-class season ticket, and wondered where all this schooling was going to end. His mother, a mincing, super-genteel little woman, with cajoling ways and a deceitful tongue, was much impressed by Horace's erudition. She pitted her feeble strength against that of her man, and secretly wrote to the boy's American uncle. Her darling, she knew, was far too good for the shop.

Horace, meantime, continued his career, when, suddenly, his father interposed. The lad had turned sixteen—time he set to honest

work to keep himself. He had eaten the bread of idleness long enough. *He* had sold papers at the age of seven.

In vain did Horace tearfully demonstrate that his education had not cost his father a penny; that, far from eating the bread of idleness, he had renounced almost every boyish pastime to pursue his self-appointed course of study. In vain did Dr. Priestly, the venerated Head, expostulate with Mr. Metcalfe senior; pointing out the very strong possibility of Horace's taking a University Scholarship, which would enable him in course of time to write himself B.A. of Oxford or Cambridge. Horace's father had "no use for frills." He was "very much obliged for kind advice, but 'e'd always known 'ow to manage 'is own affairs, and did not need any schooling, 'is time o' life. 'E'd 'ad enough already. 'Orace was coming 'ome. There was an end o't. 'E'd been getting too big for 'is boots, this year and more. Let 'im try be'ind shop counter, for a change."

"With all thy learning, lad," he said to his son, "'A reckon th'ast never mastered

double-entry. Better put 'tother rubbidge out o' tha yead, and be getting a bit o' a way on book-keeping."

The ignominy of the next few years was branded deeply on young Metcalfe's soul. His disappointment was profound and bitter. Compelled to submit to lawful authority, he developed, through detestation of its abuse, a certain contempt for all authority, a sympathy with lawless, free existence that later often led him to neglect conventional usage.

Meantime, his mother, always preaching submission, would secretly remind him that the day could not be distant when he would be independent and his own master. She wrote a second letter to his uncle, a despairing letter, begging help and counsel. This, like its predecessor, was unanswered.

One day, however—his father was in Brockburn—a well-dressed, odd-looking elderly gentleman entered the little shop and stood drumming his hands on the counter, staring about him. Horace was mounted on a ladder, taking account of stock. He

descended hastily, and asked the stranger's pleasure.

The newcomer, peering at him through his glasses, asked very abruptly,

"Are you Horace Metcalfe, boy?"

Horace, just nineteen, responded a little stiffly,

"That is my name."

"It is mine, too," said the stranger.

Horace stared.

"Go, fetch your mother, boy. She'll understand."

Thus Uncle Horace, *deus ex machina*, suddenly stepped into his nephew's life.

The stock was left in confusion, the shutters were put up. Mother and son and uncle sat together, drinking tea in the little parlour; where without any long preliminaries, the old man very quickly came to the point.

"Minnie," he said, addressing his sister-in-law, "this young gentleman of ours is spoiling in a shop. Cut out to do us all credit—I can see it at a glance, not to mention what you told me in your letters. He's the only one of his kind in the family. It's a sinful shame

to waste him. I shall take him back with me across the water. Why? Give him a sight of the world; let him learn life. He'll keep me company, too, and look after my affairs. Not that I shall trouble him long. In twelve months, or maybe under, I shall be dust and ashes. Don't interrupt me, Minnie! I know what I'm saying. I've had my warning — seen a specialist—came over for that as much as anything; that, and those letters of yours."

He leaned across the table, with a confidential air, and emphasised his words with gentle taps.

"After—my—death—my nephew—inherits —all—that—I possess. It will bring him a clear six hundred pound a year. He can live like a gentleman. That's my one condition. No shopkeeper, mark you, boy!"

Either the specialist had miscalculated, or Uncle Horace was more *rusé* than he appeared. At any rate, he lived three years after this encounter, and then met his death through a tramcar accident. His nephew, meanwhile, had learned to love him sincerely; and he

entered on his inheritance with regret. He realised his uncle's estate very profitably; travelled in both the Americas, and was on his way to Australia, when his father's death recalled him to Darley Bridge.

On his native soil, living very comfortably with his mother, his old ambition stirred in him again. There was no thought now of an Oxford or Cambridge career. His mother relied on his society; and the time for the natural transition from schoolboy to undergraduate had gone by. There was nothing, then, of the fresher in Horace Metcalf.

But, nowadays it is open to everyone to take a Degree without University residence; without the old paraphernalia of cap and gown, time-hallowed cloisters, grey and crumbling walls, and the other over-prized relics of mediævalism. Correspondence classes and cram, and periodical examinations achieve the same end much more economically. If infinite capacity for work be allowed to constitute genius, these islands are rich in a genius of which Horace Metcalfe

was no unworthy type. He applied himself with tremendous energy; was ploughed on his first entry for Matriculation; but, nothing daunted, held on his stubborn course. In the end he actually won the coveted laurels. His mother saw him capped a month before she died.

After her death he went abroad again. He had lived very quietly in Darley Bridge, his laborious studies engrossing all his time. His mother had hardly moved in society, even the small society of the suburbs, and her son had no wish to go where she could not go with him. But after some years of aimless wandering, he came to the age when a man desires a home. He had no intention of kindling his domestic hearth-fire in any foreign land. He meant to establish himself in Darley Bridge, to strike an impression among his fellow-suburbans. Darley Bridge must have quite forgotten the humble shop; it was so modest in its most prosperous days. He could re-appear as quite another person, Horace Metcalfe, B.A., citizen of the world, private gentleman living on his means.

He returned, bought a pretty house in Ellesmere Road; married and settled down. At once, all sort of legends centred round him; legends he neither refuted nor confirmed. It pleased him to be an object of public interest.

At this period of his life, his first youth left behind, his modest ambitions fulfilled, his prosperity assured, his position as local celebrity confirmed, he became that frequently insufferable thing, a man with hobbies. A man with hobbies is a man without a future, a dilletante; one scratched for further events in the great race.

His brain was a lumber room of ill-assorted information; his house a museum of incomplete collections. He grew much in demand at local debating societies; contributed articles to the leading Brockburn dailies. He attended Cavendish Square in deference to his wife's wishes, but he came to imagine his views on religion advanced. He talked of himself as "a devout agnostic."

His married life was brief as it was happy. His wife was retiring, gentle and devout.

She never mixed much in society; she never assisted her husband's social success. In fact, she never did anything at all, save adore her marvellous Horace, and, still adoring, die.

On her tomb he inscribed her name and the date of her death, leaving the enigma of her age unsolved. Below the date he had cut a tag from Virgil,

Sunt lachrymæ rerum.

After her death, he let the house furnished, and took up his wanderer's staff. The oddest accounts of his doings reached his neighbours, who were sometimes edified, sometimes scandalised; but always distinctly proud of their local celebrity.

One day, two months before Dolly's family party, he had suddenly re-appeared in Darley Bridge. His house being still in possession of his tenants, he took furnished appartments in the neighbourhood and waited for the expiry of the lease.

He had given no explanation of his return, and had made no attempt to mix with his old associates. But it seemed he kept some

private calendar, of which certain dates were set down as memorable. It must have been some such anniversary which led his feet that Sunday to Cavendish Square. No wonder his re-appearance caused a sensation.

IV.

ENCOUNTER

After the Benediction had been pronounced, and an interval of decent silence kept, a general buzz of conversation followed. Everybody stood up and looked about, leaning over into the pew in front or behind, or drifting slowly along the crowded aisle. On all hands one heard such phrases as, " Well, what did you think of the sermon ?—Don't think much of this new organist.—Really, that long prayer seemed never-ending."

Dolly was shaking hands with Mr. Metcalfe, and assuring him that he was always very welcome, when her husband, who had been counting the collection, returned to speak to her.

" Dolly," he said, " I'm afraid you must walk home without me. All the Deacons are wanted for a special meeting—only

quarter of an hour. This Varley affair, I suppose," he added, sighing.

"Very well," said Dolly. "We'll walk slowly home. The children are running round to Silverdale, to ask how Grandma is keeping."

As she spoke, they joined the slow-moving human stream that thronged the aisle. Here there were so many stoppages and encounters, that several minutes passed before they could reach the door. When Dolly and Martha gained the Chapel steps, the children were already out of sight, Harold gravely following in their direction.

"Allow me," said Mr. Metcalfe, with a little, formal bow, "to attend you to your gate. It will be a pleasure to renew an old acquaintance."

The acquaintance to which he referred had been very slight indeed, and somewhat discouraged by Arnold's disapproval. Arnold Armitage was not a man to sympathise with "devout agnosticism."

Dolly's assent was, therefore, a little awkward. Mr. Metcalfe's formal correctness in-

creased her nervousness. Cousin Martha, on the contrary, was charmed; seized his extended hand to descend the steps, and would fain have retained it the rest of the way home.

Horace Metcalfe, despite his superficial self-assurance, was very easily piqued in his vanity, very susceptible to apparent slights, quickly responsive to appreciation. He could not endure to feel anyone in his company outside the circle of his influence; but he realised now that Mrs. Armitage was outside it; not only was she unresponsive to his charm, but she was plainly embarrassed. She could not be bored by his society, she must be overawed. Or was it the memory of those secret tears that made her so nervously avoid his gaze? Yes, that must be the explanation of it. He began to be very tactful in his manner. He devoted himself to the wholly delighted Martha, without, however, appearing to leave Dolly in the cold. When addressing her directly, he lowered his voice a little, and dropped his eyes. His manner conveyed, as

he meant it to convey, understanding, sympathy, unobstrusively eloquent.

Her nervousness passed; she felt herself soothed and calmed. Arrived at the gate, she was sorry to say good-bye. She asked him, flushing at her own temerity, to come in one evening and have a talk with her husband.

"Any evening—that is except Monday—Oh, *and* Wednesday. Mr. Armitage *is* so particular about going to week-night service."

"I understand perfectly," said Mr. Metcalfe, "*Noblesse oblige*, is it not so, Mrs. Armitage?"

She had not the faintest idea what he meant, nor, for that matter, had he. But again, he cleverly conveyed to her his intention of sympathetic understanding. Lifting his hat, he looked at her for the first time in the face—a look of wonderful, chivalrous kindness. Without shaking her hand he gently pressed her fingers, achieving a declaration without words. Then he went his way, and she looked after him.

He meant nothing by it, nothing. He

simply could not help it. It was his way to win a woman's favour, and he knew he gave as much pleasure as he received. As for calling at Fotheringay Villa, and meeting her husband, he had no intention of such martyrdom. But he felt he had made himself agreeable, repaid the morning's hospitality.

"Now that's what I call a delightful man," said Martha. "Is he married?"

"A widower."

"Oh, dear! Any family?"

"No."

"Then that's just as good as single, only more considerate. I thought he had a fatherly kind of look. Is he well-off, do you know?"

"I fancy he's comfortable. He has a nice house of his own, but prefers to travel."

"Well, of course, a man will wander when he's nothing to keep him at home. But if he were married, no doubt he'd settle down."

"You seem very interested in Mr. Metcalfe."

"I was thinking, Dolly, there's the man for Laura."

"For Laura! Mr. Metcalfe! Oh, dear, no! I don't see myself Mr. Metcalfe's mother-in-law. He must be older than I am."

"I think you're mistaken, Dolly."

'Oh, I'm sure I'm younger than he is!"

"I should not have thought it."

In front of her glass, Dolly studied her reflection.

"Oh yes," she thought, "any way, I *look* younger. I can't help wishing he had not seen me crying. But what a beautiful manner he has, to be sure! How different . . . ," she sighed, and left the sentence incomplete.

"I wonder," said Arnold, after the gas was put out, "I wonder whatever's brought Metcalfe home again. Did he talk to you at all about Brentnall and Mrs. Varley?"

"Of course he did not, Arnold! As if he would. He's far too delicated-minded."

"I just wondered. It seems to me folk are talking of nothing else, and Mr. Medcalfe's views on the subject are peculiar."

"What are Mr. Metcalfe's views?"

"Those of a man of the world. I don't condemn him. But I do say he's all wrong. It's every bit of it wrong, this divorcing and separating. It encourages immorality, nothing else. There ought to be some law to put a stop to it; to compel a woman to go back and live with her husband, whether or no."

"But lots of believers uphold Divorce," said Dolly, "and if Mr. Metcalfe thinks . ."

"They do, they do!" said Arnold, interrupting her. "They've been misled by the Enemy of Souls; they've hearkened the promptings of their own evil hearts . . "

"But Mr. Metcalfe . . "

But he was not interested in Mr. Metcalfe's views. With a terrible facility, bred of long habit at the P.S.A., he began to deliver a ponderous homily. With countless repetitions, he blundered on, snared in the labyrinth of his own eloquence, from which he seemed vainly striving to find an exit. In the middle of the homily, Dolly fell asleep. He stopped, arrested by her regular breathing.

"Dolly!" He said, sitting up, "Dolly! Aren't you listening to me?"

Receiving no reply, he sighed profoundly, lay down, revolving his unspoken arguments, and himself, was presently sleeping—open mouthed.

A few days later Martha returned to Fernhead, to the great relief of all at Fotheringay Villa.

Dolly, after seeing her into the train at Darley Bridge, went straight to her favourite florist to purchase flowers. She felt the thrill of sudden emancipation. No one, nothing should prevent her visiting the Cemetery that day.

The wintry sun scattered a pale largesse of gold, then withdrew behind a cloud. By dinner-time the sky was overcast.

"Another rainy afternoon," said Arnold. "Patty, don't forget to take your waterproof."

Dolly uttered no word to betray her eager intention, but watched the gloomy clouds in anxious silence.

When all the rest had departed, she set out. It was not actually raining, but the sky was distinctly threatening, and the walk to the New Darley Cemetery was long and very exposed.

She laid her flowers in a basket, and took an umbrella. She "could not be bothered" with a waterproof, and afterwards she was glad she had done without one. Her black tailored coat and skirt became her well, giving a trimness to her ample figure that invested it with a certain youthful grace. At the moment she was not aware of such considerations, but later they assumed significance.

She crossed Cavendish Square in front of the Chapel, and entered Darley Heath Road —the long, straight road that led to the Cemetery, the traffic of which consisted entirely of funerals.

She left the houses behind her almost at once. A high brick wall, enclosing a small estate, bordered the right hand side of the road for a quarter of a mile. Above this wall bare boughs stood motionless against the

blackening sky. On the other side of the road were fields and cottages; and soon there were only fields, flat melancholy fields, arable land, divided from the road by ragged hedges. Here and there a tree-bordered lane led off to a farm, but the general character of the long, straight road was mournful, flat, depressing monotony. And after a little time it began to rain, a cold, fine, drizzling rain that whitened all the grass as with hoar frost.

She was already half-way to her goal, but had she been only on her own doorstep, she would have held her purpose. Sighing at the hostility of fate, she stopped to pin up her skirt and put up her umbrella; and as she did so a little fellow-traveller on that *via dolorosa* overtook her. He passed her, with a wistful backward glance towards her umbrella—a very little boy, carrying a very big parcel. The small, white face, blurred by the driving rain, made its mute appeal to Dolly's sympathy. She called to the child to come under her umbrella, and the pair went on together.

They came to the Cemetery railings, though not yet to the gates. Beyond those railings lay a vast necropolis, a silent city of sleepers under the rain, with little houses, marble, slate or granite; with little gardens, tended or neglected—pathetic, indifferent, dumb.

On the other hand, the straight, monotonous road; where trot, trot, trot went high-stepping horses of many funerals—hearses with nodding plumes, hearses severely plain, hearses of glass, like Snowflake's coffin in the fairy-tale; hearses high-piled with flowers, and followed by a string of empty carriages; hearses that were not hearses, but only coaches, with a little white coffin carried on a mother's knee—Love's last, unavailing protest against death. Behind the steamy windows of the coaches, the face of Sorrow, in all its many aspects, glanced dimly for a moment through the rain, and then passed on. There were hysteria, despair, resignation, indifference. There were those who had never had a drive before, and could not conceal the importance and pleasure of it.

And trot, trot, trot, at a much more rapid

pace, went those who had left their dead to the clay-cold earth; those who returned to desolated hearths, to homes which never could be homes again; those who envisaged freedom, independence, and already, in thought, invested their legacies.

There was food and to spare for the imaginative mind; but Dolly's mind was not imaginative. She was very glad to reach the Cemetery gates and feel one half her pilgrimage accomplished. At the gates she parted from her small companion. He told her he had to speak to the curator, and Dolly showed him where he must apply. "That's a very big parcel," she said, "for such a little boy." And, as she spoke, she fumbled for a penny.

"This 'ere?" he said, his birdlike eyes on the coin. "It's nobbut a dead baby—aint no weight."

"*What!*" exclaimed Dolly, with a dreadful start. "I think you're telling me stories," she added severely.

"No, I aint, you can see it, if you don't believe me."

She shook her head, and hurried on her way, while the little boy picked up the fallen penny. She felt—she knew not what, she knew not how!

The long road home! It seemed interminable! She was wet and cold, and her feet were blocks of ice. She felt the moisture oozing through her boots at every step. And her mood was desolate, uncomforted. A fine grey mist of tears—the many hopeless tears that had dewed that dolorous road—seemed penetrating to her inmost soul. She began to weep as she walked, to weep quite naturally and spontaneously, and without any awkward consciousness of the fact. But she knew not why she wept.

"*Sunt lachrymæ rerum!*" As Mr. Metcalfe knew; but, of course, Dolly Armitage could not have said what that meant. When Mr. Metcalfe himself came up behind her, and addressed her somewhat unexpectedly, she gave a cry, a start, and seized his arm.

"Mrs. Armitage! I am sure, I beg your pardon!" said that gentleman, amazed.

"Mr. Metcalfe," said Dolly, "you really must excuse me. You'll think me silly, I know; but I've just had such a turn."

"Really? I'm sorry. Let me carry your basket. Nothing personal, I hope?"

"Thank you," she said, relinquishing the basket; "I hardly like to speak of it, Mr. Metcalfe. People do say you have such advanced ideas. I'm sure *you* would not let such a thing upset you. But, well, it's made me quite nervous, quite superstitious. Do you think such things can be?"

"But you have not told me . . ."

"I expect you'll laugh at me . . ." and then she told him, and he listened gravely.

"I assure you," he said, in his pedantic way, "I find the thing both strange and pitiful, and nothing in the occurrence to move my laughter—Oh, quite the reverse. But why should you take the evil omen to yourself? To the body politic, it is, indeed, of evil omen. But that, I imagine, was not your concern."

It was not, indeed. Her mind was a little confused.

"I felt," she said, almost defensively, "I felt it meant something unlucky to myself. I hope it is not Grandma, or one of the children . . . "

"She is really quite primitive," thought Mr. Metcalfe. "I could not have conceived it of her type. She is quite interesting."

Aloud, he said gravely,

"You are somewhat over-tired and wet and cold; and you have been making a pilgrimage fraught with painful memories. I have been doing the same—

Nous devrions lui porter des fleurs;
Les morts, les pauvres morts ont des grandes doleurs.

I can just imagine your mood. But really, dear Lady, you know you should be careful! Your own health merits more consideration!"

"I shall have a hot bath as soon as I get in," said Dolly.

She began to think Mr. Metcalfe perfectly charming.

"You will come in and see us one evening, won't you?" she urged. "You know, you said you would."

"I shall be delighted," he answered, with a bow.

They parted just at the corner of Cavendish Road. Once indoors, Dolly began to shake and tremble. She had her bath and went to bed at once; kept her bed three days, and refused to see a doctor. Then she got up, and had a fresh collapse. For several weeks she was very ill indeed.

Martha Schofield, on learning of her illness and its cause, wrote an eight-paged letter, its gist, *I told you so*. She also suggested Laura's immediate return, and made inquiries after that charming Mr. Metcalfe, whom she once more put forward as *suitable*.

Dolly tore the letter into a thousand pieces. She had no desire to have her daughter home, and the other suggestion was preposterous. Fear of Martha's descending upon her quickened her convalescence. She left her bed as early as possible, and insisted that she was quite herself again.

She knew, however, that this was not the case. She was no longer physically ill,

and little outward change was visible. But she was not herself. Or was she—was she suddenly herself? And if so, what had she been these twenty years and more?

The doctor had forbidden all excitements. But what excitements had Dolly to renounce? The week-night service and the sewing meetings. She gave them up, and scarcely sighed for them. She spent her evenings in the drawing-room, her sofa drawn forward to catch the warmth of the fire, an unread book in her hand. And there, when alone, she would lie, her eyes half-closed, wondering why she felt so different.

The change was moral, nervous, emotional. Really, she had become much more human. Her sympathies had wider scope and vision; her imagination was more quickly roused than formerly. She was much more at the mercy of her emotions, emotions in which she discerned new elements, perplexing and baffling her. Withal, she felt herself younger. As the days began to lengthen, the crocus spears to pierce the ribs of winter, she became restless and dissatisfied and oddly critical

of those about her. She was strangely, constantly on the alert. She who had run so contentedly in her Rut, seemed expectant, almost desirous, of some impending change. At times she cried her eyes out over nothing; at others, a trifle could stir her ecstacy. The crescent moon, hung in a pale green sky, had sudden power on her imagination. Why? how did these things come about? She could not have said.

One circumstance gave her pleasure unalloyed; that was her growing friendship with Mr. Metcalfe.

Just at first, he only called so frequently because he had nothing more interesting on hand.

The season was very dull, even for Darley Bridge; and during his long absence he had lost his former footing. Other local celebrities had arisen. The societies had already filled their programmes, and though he was sometimes asked to take the chair or second a motion, he felt a little out of everything. The memory, even of a suburb, is short-lived.

There was nothing doing except the Varley Divorce Case, which had offered an expectation of excitement very meagrely fulfilled. Mrs. Varley and Mr. Brentnall had gone to London, and little news of their doings reached the ears of former neighbours. It was said he was almost starving, and she doing millinery for their joint support, but the facts of it no one knew. For the rest, the case was not sensational, no one having been instructed for the defence. Mr. Varley, it seemed, might avenge himself, unopposed; and the Cause List being comparatively short, the whole affair would soon be over and done with. All this was very dull. Even the Chapel had little excitement from it, for the organists who came each Sunday on approval were very mediocre and much below the standard of Mr. Brentnall.

Metcalfe, not being taken up as he had expected, and being a man who must have an audience, began, at first quite condescendingly, to drop in to Fotheringay Villa of an evening

He generally found Dolly on her couch

and Arnold at the Chapel. Patty and Frank were always of the party and sometimes Harold also. Once or twice when the younger ones had homework to keep them busy, he and Dolly were tête-à-tête. In time, gradually and instinctively, he came to prefer those evenings when Arnold would not be there. If Harold also were absent, so much the better.

The rest were entirely sympathetic to him. He began by finding Dolly an interesting study, but he very soon forgot this pretext for calling. It was Horace Metcalfe as reflected in her eyes, her ingenuous, childlike, admiring, astonished eyes, who really interested him.

Certainly, he was an excellent *raconteur*. He had wandered in many lands; he spoke several languages. He had a dramatic, pictorial power of description. His hearers saw what he would have them see, and saw with his own eyes. And if in an atmosphere wholly sympathetic, imagination at times outran experience, embroidering the bare facts with lavish detail—who, that has any

touch of artistry, will not exonerate and condone the deed?

He was in truth a modern Mandeville.

"I can't think," said Dolly, "why you don't write a book. Why!" opening her blue eyes very wide, "you would become quite famous if you did."

Well—some day, perhaps! It was not impossible. He had talked of it with a London publisher. The sigh of admiration was a wind to swell his sails.

"If I do so," he added, as an after-thought, "I shall beg leave to dedicate the volume to my most sympathetic listener.'

Dolly flushed with sudden pleasure.

It is to be regretted that this book was never published, for certainly it would have been unique. Fate seemed to have conspired against Horace Metcalfe, laying in his way so many snares and pitfalls, that his life—abroad—must have been a daily miracle.

In Corsica he had been involved in a Vendetta, and only escaped by the aid of friendly bandits. In Russia he had been

suspected as an Anarchist; in Constantinople arrested as a spy; in Morocco held up by an Arab chief for ransom. In fact so many and relentless were his foes, there seemed few countries in Europe which Mr. Mr. Metcalfe might prudently revisit.

"Well, I'm thankful," said Dolly, "I never went further than Paris. The wickedness there was bad enough for me. My husband said it was no place for decent folk. Why, they had the shops and theatres open on Sunday!"

In all these stories there figured a gentle maiden, dark-eyed, low-voiced, and variously disguised in yashmak, mantilla, or Italian peasant garb, susceptible to the charms of English travellers, and amazingly neglected by her own legitimate guardians, who played the rôle of good fairy in every crisis. Mr. Metcalfe always hurried over her entrance, and seemed chivalrously to deprecate her devotion to himself. Modesty would not permit him to enlarge on a theme so delicate, so flattering. And Dolly Armitage, who, as time went on, pictured her

blue-eyed self playing this part, was personally grateful for his manly modesty.

Arnold, who once or twice happened to be present, would, at such a reference, jerk out a nervous laugh, and say, *Now then! Now then!* and wink heavily at Metcalfe. That was his nearest approach to being a dog.

In this pleasant harmony was one discordant note. That note was struck by Harold. Harold, obviously, could not endure Horace Metcalfe; yet, if he were in the house, could not tear himself away. He would take a corner seat and, shading his eyes with his hand, rivet his sullen gaze on Metcalfe's face. He never commented, never interrupted. Only, when all the rest were most enthralled, an ugly sneer would contract the boyish mouth. Strangely, his mother never ventured to reprove him. While Metcalfe disdained, she resented his attitude. But in her resentment was an unadmitted fear.

Towards the end of February, Mr. Varley

closed his house and went to London. It was understood that he had gone about his divorce, and there was some recrudescence of public sympathy.

"For my own part," said Horace Metcalfe, "I feel there's much to be said on the other side."

The children were in the schoolroom, but Arnold was present, and Dolly trembled for his prejudices. Already she felt herself more emancipated. As a matter of fact, he frowned and cleared his throat, preparatory to delivering his opinion.

"I don't know what you mean by the other side. There's good and bad—that's all—just right and wrong. It's as easy as black and white."

"I congratulate you," said Metcalfe. "The enigma of the universe does not exist for you."

Harold looked up, glooming, unnoticed.

"Now then, Mr. Clever!" he muttered between his teeth. "At it again!"

"Really," said Metcalfe," I'm sorry for that little woman, truly sorry. How many

women know what they do when they marry? See what she offered—all her charming youth!—In exchange for—What? The companionship of a man who had done with youth and love."

"He gave her a very good home. He'd have left her comfortable."

"He gave her a very good—situation, Armitage. Oh yes, he paid her well. In a very few years she'd have been an old man's nurse."

"Her husband's nurse."

"Exactly—her husband's nurse, as most women are their husbands' upper servants—housekeepers if you will."

"I see naught wrong with that. It's nature."

"Well—accept it! She saw a way to better herself. She took it. Now, speaking as citizens of the world, can we hold her much to blame?"

"No!" whispered Dolly.

He caught her agreement with a sudden smile, observed by Harold. But Arnold was already on his feet, slowly sawing the air with outstretched arm.

" I hope, Metcalfe, speaking in all humility, I may claim a better citizenship than that you've just referred to. *Citizens of the world!* What *is* this world?"

He looked about him, gathering up their attention. Dolly began to twist her wedding ring, fidget her foot and bite her lower lip. Harold, unblinking, watched, saturnine, silent.

" But we that renounce the vanities of this world, are citizens of no unworthy City, of a City not built with hands, eternal in the Heavens . . . "

" Ah," said Metcalfe, briskly, " on that ground, of course, you've the advantage of me."

He rose and extended his hand.

" I must be going. But, remember, Armitage! You imagine marriages made in heaven. Maybe—but we've to live them out on earth. They won't have them up there."

" You've driven him away, now, Arnold," said Dolly in annoyance. " There's really no call for you to preach in that way. You

never think anyone can know better than yourself."

"Dolly!" said Arnold in absolute amazement, "Who *should* know better than I do?"

"Oh," said Dolly, springing from her couch, "you're just your Cousin Martha over again."

She went to her room, chafing with irritation. Harold was opening the gate for Mr. Metcalfe. In the lamplight, he turned his face to the older man, his young, sallow face, with heavy hostile eyes.

"Please do not discuss such subjects with my mother," he blurted out.

Metcalfe stood and stared in undisguised amazement.

"Why . . . what . . . I don't understand."

"That's no great matter. I can't have it. That's enough!"

"*You?*" he burst out laughing, and walked briskly down the street.

"So, so," he said to himself, "a dragon in the path. Pooh! the young cub! I'll set his jealousy on tenter-hooks."

And he went home laughing, not quite pleasantly, while Harold slowly went upstairs to bed.

V.

PAUSE

Spring, on her annual round, visited Darley Bridge. She came smiling from the blue and distant hills, where new born lambs cried after her passing feet; came delicately in her green and yellow gown, sprinkling scentless coltsfoot on the barren shale, and pale primroses down the country hedgerows, and hanging galaxies of starry jasmine flowers on the smoky trellises of suburban villas. She had daffodils in her lap for the wide, flat, unfrequented meadows of the Darle; mad songs of enraptured larks, beating at snowy clouds; and the old sweet dreams for those who hearkened them—dreams poignant in their very ecstacy, for to-day the world is fair, and to-morrow men must die.

Dolly, hitherto observant of the seasons

merely as weather and clothing were affected by their vagaries, was unusually sensitive to this advent of flowers. It did not affect her as it would have done a painter or a poet, nor as one long schooled in the reverent cult of beauty; but, in her own fashion, she was deeply stirred. She attributed this fact to her physical condition, her convalescence from a tedious indisposition which had kept her more indoors than usual. Moreover, her imagination had been, so to speak, prepared to receive impressions, as a piece of glass may be skilfully sensitised. Through the long wintry evenings by the fire, continual influence had been at work. Her youth had been renewed, she knew not how. Spring woke responsive echoes in her heart, smiles on her lips, and quick tears in her eyes. There was a breath of adventure on the wind. Insensibly she began to dress her part, to arrange her hair in a style more becoming and simple, to modify her too matronly attire. And she went about her house humming old songs, recalling long forgotten melodies. One in particular

had been popular in her youth :—

> O'er the blue Alsatian mountains
> Came a stranger from afar ;
> And he lingered by the fountains,
> In the light of the evening star.

It haunted her now with curious persistence, suggesting strange adventures in far lands.

Contrary to her custom, she began to take short walks ; walks which were neither messages nor calls, but simple walks. She had not done such a thing since the children were quite little, and then, of course, the walks had had an object. Now, naturally, they had none. Yet, oddly, she always set out with vague expectations, and returned with some slight feeling of regret. Why ? She did not say. She never mentioned these walks to anyone. Mr. Metcalfe had spoken of some of the country lanes as "rich in flora," referred to his own pursuit of specimens, so she hunted violets by the river side and under the hedges late-lingering celandines.

She was so abashed in meeting Mr. Metcalfe,

so ashamed of her childish posy, that had she had any fore-knowledge of the encounter, her flowers had been tossed over the nearest hedgerow. But she came on him so very suddenly, and surprised him in such an unusual occupation, that between confusion and curiosity, she had no opportunity of evasion.

Mr. Metcalfe, also, apparently, touched with the wand of youth, carried in one hand a net, not unlike a butterfly net, but very much stronger, while in the other, suspended from a string, was a glass jar—to be explicit, a disused pickle bottle—in which were collected larvæ of caddis flies, frog's spawn in a state of advanced development, and other natural curiosities. The Darle, polluted by sewage, soap and dye works, maintained no animal life; but certain trickling streamlets were yet unspoiled, and in one of these Mr. Metcalfe pursued his researches.

These two grown-up children having recognised one another, it were hard to say which was the more embarrassed. Mr. Metcalfe,

as became his sterner sex, had the power and the tact to disguise his astonishment; but Dolly, for all her endeavour flushing pink, was less successful.

"To be sure, Mr. Metcalfe," she said, "this is a surprise. Who ever would have thought of meeting you here?"

Her recording Angel must have wept a lie so transparent, and Mr. Metcalfe gallantly ignored it.

"Celandines, Mrs. Armitage!" he cried. "Now just to think of you gathering celandines."

Before she could retort, he was mouthing, mellow-voiced—

"Pansies, lilies, kingcups, daisies,
Let them live upon their praises;
Long as there's a Sun that sets,
Primroses will have their glory;
Long as there are violets,
They will have a place in story:
There's a flower that shall be mine,
'Tis the little celandine."

And so to the very end of the eight verses, while Dolly listened, full of admiration, but rendered very self-conscious by having to stand and look at him all the time. He might even have proceeded with the verses *To the same Flower*, in the same relentless manner, but Dolly tripped him up at the very outset, by remarking that this was *not* February. She was feeling more at ease.

"Come!" he cried. "So much for your country garland! Give an eye now to my watery harvesting, my caddis-worms, my . . . "

The remaining epithets were Greek to her and would be the same to the most instructed reader. They thundered splendidly past her comprehension.

"I'd no idea," said Dolly, "you took any pleasure in such simple things."

She referred, of course, to what she had understood.

"I thought you were so clever, you would despise them."

"*Despise* them, Mrs. Armitage, despise them?"

The naturalist in him came frankly to the surface ; he glowed with enthusiasm.

" Simple things, you call them, my dear Lady ! Little miracles, every one of them, I assure you. Now take the history of my caddis-worm . . . "

They went happily down the Hollow Lane together ; she with her flowers, he with his pickle jar ; attentive she, he volubly instructive. Now and then they paused, while the pickle jar was held up to the light, and its contents scrutinised. And now and then, both gazing on the bottle, they rolled together, touching arm and shoulder, muttered apologies, brusquely separated, and in a moment repeated the adventure. It was indeed a memorable walk.

At length the main road was reached, and conversation flagged. In a different manner each became slightly embarrassed, Dolly obviously so. Her companion, however, was considerate of her feelings, and at a junction of the ways he paused.

" Here we must part," he said ; " I can't go farther. I should do you shame with

my over-grown schoolboy equipment. For the rest, we have both our good gossips at Cavendish Square."

She thought him the soul of delicacy and tact; but then, how often she had thought the same before. Poor Dolly! she was very inexperienced. She went home "all in a fluster," and found it entirely delightful.

Spring, impartial in her jests and favours, had not forgotten Laura Armitage. Her advent drew with it the date of Laura's return, a date which cast dark shadows across the sunlight.

Laura had now entirely recovered her health. Her cheek was not boisterously rosy, but neither was it sallow or anæmic. It showed a glowing pallor, rare and attractive. Her figure, still immature, had greatly improved; the angles were softened, the hollows had filled out. She bore herself with youthful stateliness, half amusing, wholly charming. Her beautiful eyes condescended where her lips seemed to disdain. Her blood tingled and throbbed with wild romance,

which her cool North-country head kept well in check.

The excitement of her emotions had contributed its part in forming her; had saved her at least from heaviness and dulness, the authentic Armitage hall-marks; had given her full lips new mobility, her eyes new range of expression. She had her little secret stimulants, and those, as has been observed, not entirely innocuous.

She and Minna were now inseparable. They went long walks on the vernal hills together, read poetry and revelled in their emotions. When the cherry trees bloomed, standing knee-deep in grass and flowers, when the white narcissus lay like snow-drift on the slopes and all the wood-ways purpled with violets, they forgot even the charm of their own emotions; a very fever of ecstacy fired their blood. Such moments would stir in Minna religious fervour. If some humble chapel, folded in the hills, should, by chance, stand in the way, she needs must enter and light a flickering taper to Our Lady. And perhaps an older goddess smiled on the offering.

Scent of stale incense, tawdry images, adoring genuflections, passionate kisses rained on the Crucified, while a rustic Priest gabbled a dull Low Mass—these things were interwoven with all the rest into Laura's experiences and recollections. There were moments when Minna thought she felt a vocation, moments when she urged Laura to adopt the one true faith; but Laura was quite cold to such appeals. She had quite enough of that sort of thing at home; and Swiss Catholicism is a disenchanted cult. Laura, therefore, waited stolidly, silently, for Minna's moods to change their chameleon hue to that of the yellow back of a hidden book.

"But near my home," the ardent Minna urged, "is an old, grey shrine, Our Lady of Consolations, standing alone in a field of waving flax-flowers. They are all about her like the blue of heaven, and there, there one *must* worship!"

Great is Diana of Ephesus! Laura merely shrugged. No doubt it was very pretty, but her people were Protestant. Her im-

agination was of the constructive order and not readily impressed. Her nature resembled a lake, which, lying in shadow, is apparently profound, but one which runs to unsuspected shallows; in whose depths the adventurer constantly touches rock, at times with disconcerting suddenness. Meanwhile the date of her return drew on, and found her still reluctant. It was not altogether the thought of leaving Minna which distressed her—Laura had resources in herself. It was the contrasted vision of Darley Bridge, the dull, monotonous unloveliness of Fotheringay Villa; and the Chapel—Oh that Chapel! How she detested it! Above all, the idea of becoming a child again, just a younger member of the Armitage family, with no independent existence or position, without so much as a bedroom to herself, that brought her dreams deplorably to earth. In a household where everything was uncongenial, to have no retreat, no privacy, day or night! The thought was almost unbearable.

"How can I bear it?" she asked herself

and her friend. "How can I make mother give me a room of my own? The spare-bedroom is hardly ever occupied. I would not mind sleeping with Patty now and again when a *decent* visitor came. As for that cat, Martha Schofield, it would be a double joy to keep her out."

The problem was still unsolved, when she was unexpectedly recalled.

All through that wonderful spring, Grandma had kept her room, and latterly her bed. Her condition did not give rise to great anxiety. It seemed stationary, neither worse nor better. Had Dolly's health been normal, she might have taken alarm, but she was too much engrossed in her own affairs to do so. Every one said, When the weather grows a little warmer, she will be about again as usual.

But she nursed no delusion. She knew that her soul was spreading wings for flight, more distant, more ecstatic, than that of any lark cleaving the skies. To none but Dolly did she hint her knowledge, and

Dolly did not take it seriously. She listened indeed with ready sympathy, while the old lady talked of the impending change, of arrangements to be made after her death, of the joy of meeting old, long-parted friends, whose loving arms would surely welcome her on the threshold of that home whither she went.

"I can't talk so to any one but you; and a while ago, Dolly, I could not have talked to you. But somehow, child, you are different. I feel you nearer. There is a new look coming in your eyes; the soul is looking through them . . . Midway in life, I have known many women change; and you have come at last to the turning point, my dear. You have climbed the steepest hill; now the road goes down to the valley. Believe me, it is peace."

And Dolly wept. Of late she wept frequently and easily, and her tears, which sprang from an exquisite self-pity, brought a kind of solace with them. It was for herself she wept, though she did not know it; for the years, the irrecoverable years

of careless youth, so rich in treasure; for the knowledge, the useless knowledge of middle age, only attained when the treasure has been squandered. Her tears, no longer difficult, agonising, but easy and refreshing, left her eyes a clearer blue, and her cheek unstained by their passage. Her whole expression was full of tender charm.

The problem of Grandpa's future remained, not merely unsolved, but undiscussed, for no one was willing to admit its imminence. The old man himself, with the blunted perceptions of age, did not think his loved companion could really leave him, and she was reluctant to disturb his peace of mind.

So the days slipped by, and she grew a little weaker. As the sun mounted, so the shadow lengthened . . . And in the end, as the popular saying goes, it came quite suddenly and unexpectedly. It always does. It is always incredible, impossible, that that which only a moment ago was here, should now be other-where, or not at all; and that which was so familiar and dear, should suddenly be so changed, so new, so

strange, and clothed upon with such cold dignity.

Telegrams summoned Martha Schofield and Laura; and all the bustle that attends the greatest of monarchs was soon in evidence. At Fotheringay Villa things seemed upside down. A sewing-woman was preparing Patty's mourning, stitching by gaslight in the shuttered gloom. Dolly was laid up with a nervous shock, and fretting at enforced inactivity. Arnold was at Silverdale, looking after Grandpa and making all the arrangements for the funeral.

Martha arrived like a whirlwind and announced her intention to stay till the funeral was over, forcing Dolly, haggard and shaken, out of bed, to make the needful preparations. Martha, who never approved of giving way, applauded Dolly's sense and energy.

"There's nothing like occupation for curing the dumps. And, after all, Dolly, at her time of life, it was only natural. I don't expect to see her years, nor you won't Arnold's been telling me she looks beautiful, but I'm not going to harrow up my feelings—

What's the good? I'm not afraid of death; I've not the slightest ground to be. But I never believe good comes of looking on it. Some people gloat on corpses. Most unhealthy!"

The next few days were a nightmare for all concerned. Arnold slept with his father at Silverdale, and Dolly in her lonely bed lay wakeful. Harold assumed the role of major domo, continually checking and rebuking Frank and Patty, whose youth was at moments more potent than their memory of death. Laura, who wired that nobody was to meet her, came up from London alone, feeling quite important. That sensation soon gave way to one less pleasant. She felt herself, more than ever, an alien in the household. The whole environment had grown distasteful to her. She quarrelled constantly with her younger sister; tossed her head with supreme contempt of Cousin Martha, and did not give her poor mother the least assistance. She also lay sleepless, and wept her vanished bliss. Her black dress was dreadfully unbecoming to her, and

every circumstance of her return depressed her.

"As soon as this time is over," she said to herself, "I'll ask for a room of my own, and a dress allowance. If father won't give it me, I'll go out and work for it."

The only person who found herself at her ease was Martha Schofield. *She* had her mourning all ready. *She* had always an outfit for any emergency.

"I thought you were tempting Providence," she said to Dolly, "when you got that pale blue house-dress, a month back. You might at least have got grey, in case of this.",

Thus having ample leisure at her disposal, she occupied it in setting everyone right, and causing twice the commotion necessary.

The day of the funeral dawned, serene and cloudless; a cause for thankfulness to all concerned. The family, early assembled at Silverdale, put themselves meekly at the disposition of the undertaker's man.

Grandpa, who had insisted on being present, sat with Arnold and Dolly in the first coach.

Dolly neither knew nor cared how the others were arranged; though Martha said later it had been greatly mismanaged. To Dolly, over-strung, sleepless for several nights, the whole affair appeared a ghastly farce. She felt herself shaking, shaking with nightmare laughter. All along the road to the New Cemetery, she was engaged in controlling her hysteria.

On the opposite seat her husband, holding his father's hand, repeated from time to time, with profound emotion, some scripture text, conveying hope and solace. The old man never raised his down-bent head. It seemed doubtful if he heard or understood.

So, under a sky argent and azure with April heraldry, to the songs of larks, the rustling of tender leaves, the ripe fruit fell into the lap of Mother Earth. When the first soil pattered on the coffin lid, Dolly's nerve-racked mood changed to one of purest grief. She wept; her tears brought relief, and set her imagination free again.

Returning, exhausted, she leaned back in her corner, and stared at the long road.

She remembered the last occasion on which she had walked it. She recalled, with vivid precision, every detail of the way. Here Mr. Metcalfe had overtaken her. Every phrase of their conversation sprang to life in her tired brain. Her lips moved silently; she was talking to him. They crossed the Hollow Lane that led to the Darle. Again she remembered the day of the celandines, and all the many days that had followed on. There had been no harm in it, nothing but innocent pleasure. She had always carried her field flowers to Grandma's bedside. Grandma had loved to have them . . . her blue eyes overflowed. But how odd that he had sent no word, no message. He must have heard, surely, of their bereavement. Perhaps he intended coming to call in person. A little faint smile hovered over her tired lips.

She expected Martha to take her leave next day, but Martha expressed her intention of remaining over the week-end, and going on Sunday with the rest of them to Chapel.

"There's sure to be some allusion, I suppose."

Meanwhile there were countless details to be arranged. They had all been assuming, quite as a matter of course, that Grandpa would give up his house and come to live at Fotheringay Villa. There, naturally, he would occupy the spare bedroom, refurnished to his own liking.

The old man, when consulted, obstinately refused. He desired to spend the remainder of his days in the home that had, for him, been consecrated by many happy years. He would not part with one stick of furniture. She had cared for it. It was sacred in his eyes. Death should find him waiting where she had waited. From this determination nothing moved him.

"But, Grandpa, think! You cannot live there alone."

"I shall never be alone where she is near me."

For the present, the doctor warning them not to thwart him, they must needs accede to his wish, and Harold went to sleep at Silverdale.

It was then that Laura had her great

inspiration. She offered to go and live at Silverdale. Everyone was taken aback by the proposal; every one declared it was entirely out of the question, and then began to discuss its practical bearings. Cousin Martha was quite delighted with the idea, and lavished great praise on Laura's nobility and self-sacrifice and so forth. Laura's offer was not, however, without conditions.

"If I go to live with Grandpa," she said to her mother, "I go as his companion. He has a housekeeper. To be his companion will be my occupation, and I can't run to you every time I need a blouse or a pair of gloves. I must have a dress allowance, like other girls. Grandpa can supplement whatever you allow me. He's very comfortably off, and it's only right he should do it, if I go."

Dolly, immensely impressed by her daughter's practical sense, promised to lay her suggestions before her father.

Patty, who also had ideas of her own on the subject of having a bedroom to one's self, was discreetly jubilant, and flung all her influence in Laura's scale.

And so, with miraculous facility, it was arranged. Laura could hardly believe in her own good fortune. She had the sense to dissimulate her rapture, and went about grave and preoccupied, as if already full of responsible cares.

By Saturday night the whole affair was settled, but a week must elapse before Laura could be installed. A couple of rooms were to be arranged for her, and her wardrobe needed suitable amplification before she finally left her mother's wing. They were days of anxious, exultant preparation.

Sunday morning came; a terribly trying occasion. The allusions Cousin Martha had expected, were of course inevitable. They were at once distressing and gratifying. There were references in the prayers, the hymns and the sermon; and after the Benediction had been pronounced, the whole congregation stood for the Dead March. At last the dreadful ordeal was at an end, and escape permitted. Grandpa went home with the rest, and dined at Fotheringay Villa. The reaction of grief had, by this time, set

in; a dull fatigue, a lifeless despondency, tongue-tied and drooping. Even Martha flagged.

"By the way," she remarked, "I was really quite disappointed not to see that charming man at Chapel. You know the one I mean, Dolly."

"Oh, Mr. Metcalfe."

"Mr. Metcalfe! That's it. Has Laura met him yet?"

Laura looked up, *intrigued*, as our neighbours say, alike by Martha's smirk and Harold's frown.

"Metcalfe?" said Arnold. "He's away from home."

"Away from home!" echoed Dolly, somewhat blankly; and suddenly she felt tired, horribly tired.

"He wrote me some days ago," continued Arnold, "expressing his sympathy and that sort of thing. Sent his regards to you Dolly, but I quite forgot to mention it at the time . . . He's gone for three weeks to Llandudno, I understand, while his house is being prepared for his return. Redeco-

rated throughout, from top to bottom. People are saying he's bringing home a bride, and I really fancy there may be something in it."

Laura, watching her mother across the table, saw her turn from red to white, from white to green. Then everyone sprang up in consternation. Dolly had fainted.

VI.

THE GRADIENT

Three weeks—a month—had gone by since Grandma's death. The turfy hillock which marked her resting-place was beginning to settle down. Already Arnold had been to select a stone. As for Dolly, she made weekly pilgrimage, as is the wont of all while grief keeps its first poignance.

She wanted it to keep that poignance long. She desired to lave her spirit in blameless tears, to lash her conscience with the memory of death. Since her fainting-fit that memorable Sunday, her sense of perspective had been inverted and distorted. What had then seemed trivial, now loomed grotesque, enormous; what innocent, obsessed her guiltily. Her morbid thoughts dwelt on what might have been. She shuddered away from imaginary sin; defied supposititious temp-

tation; challenged occasion to prove her wifely virtue. In the end she regarded the old lady's death as a *Warning*—a Warning foreshadowed when, on that Road of Tears, she had met the Little Boy and his ominous load.

For all this self-accusation and self-abasement, there was, in the simple facts of the case, no ground. What ground there may have existed in her own fancy, in her own unadmitted desire, may be deduced only from her remorse.

On the whole she was thankful Laura was not at home. Her absence was a relief. In the short time she had spent with her family, Laura had shown herself uncomfortably observant. She had watched her mother with too intelligent eyes; her lips had seemed to suppress continual question. It might have been only Dolly's nervousness, but she felt curiously young and inexperienced, an awkward bungler in the game of life, so long as her daughter's quiet eyes were on her. As for Harold, there was no understanding him! So at least she told herself.

In May, Mr. Varley returned to Darley Bridge. His *Decree Nisi* was already some weeks old; in less than six months he would be free to re-marry. Whether he would do so was a matter of much speculation. His former wife and her lover were committed to oblivion, since nothing occurred to keep their memories green. Mr. Varley's own conduct roused considerable comment. That he should settle down in his old home and live there just as if nothing had taken place, showed him unfeeling, and lacking in delicacy. But all reports of his life were mere speculation; for if he had shown himself unsociable before, he now immured himself in complete seclusion, refusing to recognise any former acquaintance, or admit any visitor to his desolate hearth. Curiosity, being so cruelly disappointed, was fain to pose as unappreciated sympathy.

All this time, Mr. Metcalfe did not return, though his house was ready and radiant for his reception. Dolly passed it several times, going out of her way to do so. Its cheerful aspect taunted her melancholy.

She heard on all hands vague rumours of his marriage. According to some, he was already married, and his absence was a kind of unofficial honeymoon. The story grew, was confirmed and amplified, as such stories do grow in a small provincial suburb.

"What earthly difference can it make to me if he *is* married?" said Dolly to herself.

And so the fresh colour faded from her cheek, the dewy brightness quenched in her blue eyes, her step grew heavy and listless. As she was by nature, plump and matronly, care did not waste her form or hollow her features, but rather imprinted a dull, sulky expression, which belied the sharpness of her hidden grief. A few white threads appeared in her brown hair which began to fall like sad, autumnal leaves. All her friends advised her to seek a change of air, but she knew the vanity of such advice. Why should she carry her burden to and fro, unable to lay it down? And then, she could not think of leaving Arnold!

Without any warning, he appeared one

Sunday at Chapel. She could scarcely believe her eyes, unclosed at the end of the prayer, and startled by his presence. There he sat in one of the transept pews, at right angles to those in the aisle. His arms were folded, his head was turned towards the pulpit, his face was calm, expressionless, serene. And he was alone—alone! And at once the poor woman was wonderfully happy.

"Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good,
His mercy endureth for ever."

She sang with fervent joy, unaware of the slightest incongruity.

For three days Dolly did not venture out of doors. She was struggling with temptation, a ludicrous and terrible temptation, to go out into the gladness of the Spring, and gather flowers in the meadows by the Darle. She struggled valiantly, calling on Heaven to help her; struggled vainly, and fell. What was the harm?

It was May. Laburnams and lilacs stood in bloom; hawthorn was snowy all down

the Hollow Lane. In Darley Wood under the silvery beeches, bracken stood curled like a Bishop's pastoral crook, and hyacinth spread a haze of perfumed purple. By the Darle the meadows glittered, cloth of gold—bright buttercups and garish dandelions. And the larks! how gladly, madly they lilted skyward! And that overarching dome, how vast it seemed, how blue! How lazily travelled the clouds before the breeze—high toppling summer bergs!

"Well," he said, meeting her at the usual place, "you've been a long time coming. You know, I've expected you every day since Sunday. You saw me in Chapel, did you not?"

"Yes," she said, almost inaudible with emotion. "Yes, I saw you."

And then—it would out—for she was quite inexperienced and very tactless—

"Is is true—they do say—I've heard you are going to be married."

He looked at her sharply, with suddenly kindled interest; drew in his breath, but refrained from the softest whistle. He was amazed; amused, complacent, flattered.

" Poor little woman ! " he thought, tugging at his blonde moustache.

He did not answer her immediately, and she turned crimson, meditating flight. Then, having enjoyed her mute embarrassment, he condescended to play her tender fears—

" Our neighbours learn all our little secrets, don't they ? No keeping anything from them ! "

" Then it *is* true ? " said Dolly.

Her voice was perfectly level, but her flushed face slowly paled. She made her heroic effort,

" I hope you will be happy."

" Thank you," he answered, " I am very happy now. I only ask the continuance of the moment."

She looked merely bewildered, dazed, unhappy. He broke the tension, leaning a little towards her.

" And you, did you believe the gossips' talk ? "

She muttered something unintelligible.

" Tell me, dear Lady, do you believe them now ? "

She did not believe anything or anyone. She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

"Oh dear," she sobbed, "I wish you would go away! What must you think of me!"

"Don't you know . . . " he paused for a word non-committal and consoling. . . "Don't you know the deep *respect* I feel for you? You are not afraid of me?"

"Oh, *no!*" said Dolly, shrinking away from him.

"Must I really go away?"

"I think you ought to."

Her hand seemed to flutter, vaguely, uncertainly; he possessed it, retained it, presently ventured to kiss it. They were sitting together on the fragrant, sun-warm turf; the larks were still shrilling their May-song in the blue; Dolly was still repeating, What must he think of her?

"Oh dear, Mr. Metcalfe, what are we coming to?"

"To the best life has to give—the very best. But won't you call me Horace?"

"Would it be right?"

"Of course."

"I don't think I dare . . . and if anyone heard?"

"Oh," he said frowning, "that is for our private hours; here with the larks, the butterflies and blossoms. When others are present, I shall be Mr. Metcalfe, you Mrs. Armitage. That is most important."

"I understand. I'll try."

"And may I say *Dorothy?*"

"All my people call me Dolly."

"Yes, I know."

He was half impatient; she really was rather obtuse; but now, having caught his meaning she laughed, somewhat weakly, and then, as if startled by the impious sound,

"Oh dear, Mr. Metcalfe . . . "

"Horace," he corrected.

"Are you sure we're not doing wrong?"

"Quite certain—Dorothy." . .

She flushed, just like a girl, and dropped her eyes.

"It does sound—nice!"

"So would *Horace*—on *your* lips."

"Horace," she whispered.

"Dorothy," he murmured.

The lark-song ceased; the silence was unbroken, a vast, contented silence, bland and golden!

She had called him Horace. He had called her Dorothy. She had let him kiss her hand . . . and that was all! From that cloud-dappled vault, immeasurably immense, what outraged Deity could spy out their fleeting bliss, and threaten and denounce with thunder of his wrath?

The golden days went by, day after day. Life was a legend inscribed on a fair page, with all the illuminations gold and azure.

Dolly met Horace Metcalfe regularly. Now it had come to a crisis, the crisis seemed strangely sudden; even as the brink of a precipice is sudden, however gradual the approach thereto. They had not yet fallen down the precipice; Metcalfe had no intention that they should do so. He had not yet decided whether Dolly's favours were worth the risk of any broken bones. Meanwhile there was for them both sufficient excitement to be had in gathering

flowers on the crumbling brink, and sometimes casting a glance to the depths below.

It was she who, having left her accustomed Rut, was the more eager to travel fast and far. Her first timidity once overcome, she soon grew reckless and avid of experience. For him this was not the first experience of its kind; he had not the least idea of its being the last. Life was a coat of variegated colour, parsemé with pearls of glad experience.

But she was a woman in her early forties. It had never been before; it would never be again. Some instinct bade her press from the ripe fruit the last drop of its mingled bitter-sweet. And the bitter was not lacking to the draught. She recalled the vanished years, the wasted years! Years dedicate to marriage, and ignorant of love; years given to duty, and by no means to delight. What had she done with the treasures of her youth? Like fairy gold, it had gone ere she could spend it. She had been an upper servant in Arnold Armitage's house, these twenty years and more.

She had borne Laura, Harold, Frank and Patty ; prepared their tiny garments, suckled and reared them. She had economised, arranged, made do ; pretended she did not care for finery, and looked askance on harmless gaiety. How many things had never come her way ! Pictures, theatres, books ; wine, resturants, dancing ; London in the Season, Paris in the Spring ! There must be a world, a wonderful glorious world, of which she now heard tell for the first time in her life. Why, alas ! had it never fallen to her lot to cross the frontiers of enchanted lands, far, dazzling lands that lured and beckoned her ?

O'er the blue Alsatian mountains—

There, Oh ! there ! . . . In dreams she journeyed towards the realm of Heart's Desire, never alone !

..

Apart from every other circumstance, Metcalfe, when he forgot his pedantry, could prove a delightful companion in the open. He knew the history of bird and beast and flower ; he collected local legends

and traditions; he had the rare gift of accurate memory; so that, of his vast and heterogeneous reading, no detail was blurred by the passing of the years. Dolly, full of admiration for his gifts, found her own interests enlarged on every side. She listened devoutly where she did not understand. She was indeed an ideal listener, sympathetic, attentive, unargumentative, never dreaming of taking a line of her own.

All this was of service to Metcalfe in his relations with her. It kept them from straying into that Slough of Sentiment towards which the woman was always pulling him. The Slough of Sentiment and the Precipice of Passion were spots marked *Dangerous* in the Chart he kept for reference. Between the two he pursued a primrose path of perfect safety. He was firmly resolved not to depart from it.

Their walks were of necessity curtailed. Arnold came home every day but Market Day to mid-day dinner; and the children came home every day without exception. Just when Metcalfe pulled out his sandwiches

and flask, Dolly must turn to the hot and dusty road which led to Fotheringay Villa and Irish stew. In the hottest weather, Arnold liked his dinner hot.

Small wonder she set her heart on a picnic with her friend! Under the beechen shade of Darley Clough, at the old Bowling Green Inn across the Darle, or in any pleasant, green, sun-dappled glade, no matter where, she desired the symbolic breaking of bread together. A humble pleasure, surely, but just beyond her reach; it dangled, tantalising her desire.

When she broached the subject to Metcalfe, he showed reluctance. Too risky, he said; did not approve the idea. She importuned him, almost with tears, and he seemed to yield, said he would think it over and let her know.

Each time they met, she asked if he'd thought it over, and grew querulous with his unvarying negative. She began to dim the pleasure of the hour, fretting for one as yet out of her grasp. She would lie awake at night, devising ways and means.

A woman, as has been said, of limited experience and very few ideas, she was easily obsessed.

June drew to an end ere fortune favoured her, despatching Arnold to London for three full days. Harold, oppressed with responsibility, would not, during his father's absence, come home for dinner. He knew of a very good eating-house near the office. Dolly, fearing her son much more than she did her husband, felt his absence, on all grounds, to be a relief. Towards Patty and Frank, who were still "the children" to her, she did not feel she owed any account of her doings.

She had not seen Metcalfe for at least a week, when this hope of new adventure came to cheer her. He no longer called of an evening at Fotheringay Villa, to Arnold's surprise, and the children's loud regret. Nor, though comfortably installed in his own house, did he ask the Armitage family to call.

She was troubled how to communicate her news, and wrote at last under fear of his reproof. She knew not what means he

would take to answer her letter, but left it to his ingenuity.

Next morning, while dusting the drawing-room, she heard a ring at the door. The door was opened, and she recognised his voice. She grew quite white, felt her knees shake under her, and clutched with trembling hand the back of the chair. He was asking—preposterous !—asking to see her husband—her husband, never at home at this time of day, and since last night in London ! What could he mean by it ? Then she suddenly understood. How clever of him ! Yes, of course, if Mr. Armitage was away, he would like to see Mrs. Armitage for a moment. She thrust her duster under the nearest cushion, but had not time to remove her overall.

There she stood, as he was shown in, all expectation. Her cheeks were flushed, her soft hair becomingly ruffled ; over her plain black dress, her blue and white apron, starched, spotless, enhancing the colour of her eyes. She looked so comely and timid, her wide eyes fixed on his entrance, that he

paused after the maid had closed the door, looking at her with smiling appreciation. She made a little step forward, touched his arm, and — Oh! discretion! whither art thou flown?—his arm was about her, his lips were on her own! She clutched him, uttering an inarticulate sound, a cry of surprise and rapture, her face pressed on his shoulder.

Thus they passed another milestone on the road; passed it without misgiving or qualm of conscience, so much of joy the high gods gave and grudged not.

It seemed a long time before either of them stirred. He, first of the two, recovered self-possession. He touched her very gently.

"Be careful, Dorothy! Some one may come in."

She looked up, glowing and dewy, a full-blown rose and trembling to the fragrant breath of summer.

"I don't care if they do!" she answered ardently.

"But I care," he said curtly; then, noting her surprise, "you know it's on your

account we must be careful. Sit down, over there, and listen."

"Let me sit near you."

"Better not, Dorothy. Do as I tell you now, there's a good girl."

She obeyed, reluctantly.

"You know you were rash to write to me as you did. I came here meaning to be very angry."

"Angry?"

"Why, yes! We must not be reckless. We can't afford a scandal, either of us. However, you don't need to worry. I shan't scold you any more. Only be careful in future."

"If you only knew how I have been longing to see you!"

"Poor little woman!"

"Can you manage it, Horace? It may be my only chance."

Her voice had the wistful inflections of innocent childhood, begging a holiday, fearing brusque refusal. In some very simple women this childlike quality is permanent. To certain men its charm is irresistible. It

veneers their dearest sins with purity. Metcalfe greatly desired to kiss the plaintive suitor; but he only smiled and caressed his fine moustache. And she, divining his emotion, smiled; her eyes followed his movements and hung on his lips, expectant.

"If you are good, and will do just as I tell you, you shall go. Meet me to-morrow morning, half-past eleven. Say you'll be out for lunch, but don't say more. You're sure to bungle it if you try to explain."

"I need not say anything to Harold; he won't be in."

"So much the better," said Metcalfe, frowning slightly.

"Don't bring anything with you," he continued. "I shall have everything. We'll walk by the river as far as Netherby Shaw. The honeysuckle is coming into bloom there."

"And tea at the Bowling Green Inn," persisted Dolly.

"I am not going to promise that. We might be seen."

"They say it is such a wonderful old-world place."

"Well, you can go in and get a cup of tea. It's only ten minutes' walk from Netherby Shaw. I must be off," he added, foreseeing protest.

Just at the drawing-room door, her hand on the knob, she lifted her lips to his in mute appeal. He looked at her smilingly, and shook his head; then would have kissed them lightly, half in jest, but they met his own with fervour, feverish, eager. Again he had to disengage her hold.

As he walked home, he felt uncomfortable. The Slough of Sentiment had been hitherto avoided, but the brink of the Precipice seemed uncommonly near. Already he felt a certain vertigo as he envisaged possibilities.

And Dolly, with fervent lips and starry eyes, prepared for herself that worst of tragedies—the tragedy at which the spectators smile.

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VII.

BY THE WAY.

Mr. Varley, people affirmed, was growing queer. His solitude was causing him to brood. He ought to leave Darley Bridge, sell up the house and travel. His business friends added, with still more urgency, that he ought to clear out Tarifas while he could do so; there was bound to be a fall, perhaps a slump. No one could counsel him these things to his face, for he met all attempts at friendliness with a rebuff.

His old housekeeper, devoted to his interests, bewailed the change that had lately fallen on him. She confessed herself nervous, and the master odd. He would seem, she lamented, to go off into a daze, not appearing to know rightly where he was, and looking about "as if he expected summat, summat as didn't come." And then he would

fall into moods of deep depression. His father had died of softening of the brain—she remembered it, and hinted at a doctor; but he asked her what she thought ailed him, and of course she dared not say. Once or twice—a circumstance most unusual—he had been encountered walking alone in the fields, shaking his head and talking to himself. By haunting the scenes of his wife's disloyalty, did he hope to understand it? None could say. He admitted no one to his confidence.

In fact, there was only one person with whom, at this time, he would deign to exchange the barest courtesies, and that was old Grandpa Armitage.

Why? A riddle! Possibly he thought the death of the old man's wife might constitute a community of loss. Perhaps because Grandpa, shaken by age and grief, neither criticised nor questioned nor advised, and often seemed but half conscious of his presence. Mr. Varley would drop in quite unexpectedly, entering in his old, brusque, aggressive manner; and then he would

gradually fall into silence, gazing in front of him as if meditating, or making disjointed remarks, abrupt and brief, addressed to no one in particular.

Laura found him absurd, but somewhat alarming, especially when his eyes encountered hers. She always watched his departure with relief; and yet, his affairs, as her mother had foreseen, held a certain interest for her. She found the whole episode piquant, very *French*, and speculated on its consequences. Thus, like a stone flung into a lazy pool, the Varley Divorce stirred ripples, ever widening, in that dull and highly respectable suburb of Brockburn.

It was with no thought of sinister precedent that Dolly looked forward to her holiday.

She was happy! Oh, ecstatically happy! She kept pausing to look at her bliss, to handle it, almost—the instinct was with difficulty suppressed—to thank God for it. She was glad Harold was not coming home that day for dinner; he must have noted

the shining rapture in his eyes. The younger children, responsive to her mood, frolicked like lambs in a sudden gleam of sun. And at the sewing meeting that afternoon, her tongue was as quick as her needle, though never sharp. She, staid and matronly and quite uninteresting, was full of little jests, beaming with smiles. Everyone noticed it, commented upon it, for the flush of second youth is very becoming.

Returning home after the meeting, in high good spirits, she discovered Laura in the dining-room, where the maid was already engaged in preparing tea. Her daughter's presence slightly checked her exuberance. There was that in Laura's glance, inquiring, direct and unwavering, that drove her mother behind her slight defences.

Yet what danger from Laura's direction menaced her? She would have refuted, with fluttering vehemence, the mere suggestion that she suspected danger. The relations between the two had subtly changed of late. While ostensibly treating Laura as yet a child, secretly Dolly admitted her a woman;

still more secretly acknowledged her a judge of her own conduct; and, so secretly that she herself did not realise it, somewhere she nourished fear of her as a rival. The oscillation of manner resulting from this state of feeling was obvious enough to Laura, as yet lacking the clue to its significance.

Encountering her daughter immediately on her return, Dolly's whole demeanour underwent a change. She veiled the too ardent sparkle of her eyes with downward lids, slackened the buoyant energy of her gait, and subdued the high staccato of her voice. She had not expected Laura. She felt nervous, slightly resentful of her presence, as though Laura had come to spy on her privacy. Turning with awkward diplomacy on the maid, she bade her leave clattering the knives and forks.

"It's your night out, isn't it, Annie? You can be off. I'll finish the table for you. Her fingers are all thumbs," she explained to Laura as Annie left the room. "That clattering about with dishes drives me silly."

"What's the matter with Annie lately?"

asked Laura somewhat abruptly.

"The matter? How do you mean?"

"Have not you noticed a difference?"

"A difference? What sort of a difference?"

"Well, I don't know how to describe it. She's not ill?"

"Ill! She's as strong as a horse."

"There's something wrong."

"You take such fancies, Laura! Don't go putting ideas in her head. Girls are always ready to think they're ill."

"Has she quarrelled with her sweetheart?"

"How should I know? I don't concern myself with Annie's private affairs, any more than I look for her to concern herself with mine."

"Hm!" said Laura, "you may not look for it, but you may be sure she notices."

"Notices what?"

"Why, everything, of course! All of them do. Well, when are you expecting father home?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Not for a day or two. He only went this morning."

Instinctively her tone became defensive.

Annie, meantime, had reached her attic bedroom. Once or twice, climbing the stairs, she stopped for breath; and, arrived in her room, she sat down on the side of her bed, inert, sulky, fatigued.

Her face, too pale and too fat for comeliness, was only rendered expressive by her eyes, small, narrow grey-green eyes with a hint of malice in them, gleaming like polished stones under her light-red hair. Her lips were thin and nervous, tending to downward curves. Her strong, squat figure was lumpy and ungainly. To a casual glance she appeared a nonentity, though her eyes held always that sharp, disquieting glint.

Recovering from her fatigue, she rose to her feet and slowly crossed the room to her dressing table. She was young, but she did not walk with the step of youth. Her step was heavy, listless, a little dragging. With languid gestures she donned a light grey dress, pinning the waist where the fasteners would not meet. Then, having completed

her toilet, she unlocked her modest trunk, drew forth a shabby purse, and balanced it in her hand considering. She turned out the contents on the counterpane, and reckoned them two or three times with careful brow. The lines about her mouth intensified, a settled, sulky look clouded her eyes. At last she withdrew half a sovereign from her savings, put back the rest in the trunk and went heavily downstairs. Encountering Laura as she reached the door, she straightened her shoulders, assumed a cheerful air and brisker step. Her behaviour, exactly the reverse of Dolly's, had a strange resemblance to it. As the one strove to mask her delight, so the other her depression. But both were women and had woman's reason for it.

She walked sharply enough till out of sight of the windows, then, relaxing her pace, crossed over Cavendish Square and followed the main road to the Hollöw Lane. Here a man awaited her, leaning over a gate, whistling, and cutting notches in a stick to pass the time. He looked up, discontented, as she approached.

"Late again!" he said, and spat.

She flared out sullenly.

"Late! Thou great, idle oaf, playing thyself, and me trudging all the road. Lolling there and grumbling all the while, 'stead of coming to meet me at the corner."

"Now then, my lass, not so much of your tongue or I'll be off."

"Be off and welcome. I'll not be the loser."

He put his tongue in his cheek and looked at her sideways, then slipped his arm about her sullen shoulders.

"Come lass, come Annie! Don't take me up so short now. Is not it natural I should be longing for thee?"

"Longing for me, indeed!" She curved her lip. "Longing for th' brass! Oh, you don't need to talk! Tisn't for myself you love me—not a straw. 'Tis for what you can get out of me. That's all. What a fool I am to run to your beck like a dog, and knowing all the while the sort you are. I've done with it, Dick!" She gave him a vicious push. Dost hear me, lad? I swear it now! I

mean it! Not another penny shall you have of me. It's not only for myself I'm bound to save."

On the last phrase her shrill voice broke, unmelodious. She began to cry, hysterically, weakly, and cryingly leaned still nearer her companion. The man drew her into a by-path with cajoling, clumsy gestures. On the tree-fringed border of Darley Wood he paused, and urged her to sit beside him on the turf. With every sob her defiant courage ebbed. He circled her waist and drew her closely to him.

"Anyone made remarks?"

She shook her head.

"Quite sure Missus hasn't noticed?"

"Positive. A sight too busy with her own concerns. I'd dare her to speak to me."

"Thou'rt a good lass, Annie; fond and bonny and jannock."

"When wilt'a wed me, Dick?"

"Oh, that'll be alright."

"Yes, now, but when?"

"As soon as I can scrape the brass together."

"Why can't you save a bit? You've a good place. What's wrong?"

"In too much of a hurry to give thee a good home, lass. That's what does it; I try to make too much and I lose my chances. If I'd a fiver to spare now, I'm on to a dead cert. I'd turn it into fifty by to-morrow."

"You're always saying that."

"I've been unlucky, Annie, danged unlucky. It isn't my judgment that's wrong. It's the luck that goes against me."

"I say!" she remarked, with sudden irrelevance, "what do you think? The master's gone away. She had her gentleman friend to see her this morning. Kissing they were, fair bouncers! My, if Master only knew."

"Well, any road, she can't turn round on you, lass."

"Can't think what he sees in her. Not like as if she was younger. Quite an elderly woman I consider her. Hast ever seen her, Dick?"

"Seen her; can't say I more than looked at her. Waiting on Sunday to take you

to *Sunday School.*"

She laughed unevenly, finding his hand.

"Master—he's a fair terror! He'd kill her if he knew."

"Would he, now? Would he really?"

"Why, what of it?"

"Happen she'd pay you something to keep your mouth shut."

"Not as I am just now. I say Dick!"

"Well?"

"Let's talk about ourselves. I've something for thee."

Reluctantly she drew out her shabby purse.

"I spoke a bit sharp just now. I was put about. You will marry me, won't you, Dick?"

Slipping the coin into an inner pocket, he rewarded her with masterful caresses.

"Why, aren't you just as good as my wife already? And as sweet as barley-sugar."

She laughed a weak, complacent, yielding laugh; and leaning back on his arm, invited his kisses.

And for these, whom Dolly thought beneath

her notice, June had the golden splendour of her twilight, the luscious fragrance of her honeysuckle, the fluting notes of birds that sought their nests.

" You stick to me, Annie," said Dick, " and I'll not desert you. Be a good lass—I swear I'll play you fair."

She flung experience to the balmy wind, and took the pleasure of the passing hour.

For there are so many ways of love!

VIII.

DANGER SIGNAL

Laura went back to Grandpa immediately after tea, and Dolly was left undisturbed to indulge her secret rapture. She did not even sit up for Annie's return, but, pleading a headache, retired quite early to bed. There she lay wide-eyed and smiling at the darkness, on which her fancy pictured fairy bowers, wild roses, honeysuckle, rustling boughs; mad kisses, meeting hands, adoring eyes. For long she could not sleep, and then uneasily; starting awake, remembering, with a sudden stab of joy,

"He loves me! loves me! I shall see him soon."

She rose, feeling almost exhausted, but ran at once to her window and looked out. The sky was blue, a curious, slate-coloured blue; and the sun was very hot. She went to her cupboard and drew out a muslin dress,

a white muslin dress, with touches of rose-coloured velvet here and there. It was long since she had worn it, and now it was entirely out of date; but she had always liked it. Dared she put it on to-day? Was she too stout? And her mourning—did that matter? She could take the rose-colour from the neck and waist, and put black silk instead, but it would not look so becoming. What a pity!

While she considered the question, the breakfast bell rang, and she slipped on a dressing gown. She would put the white dress on later, after the children had gone. It would keep it fresher, too.

She forced herself to take a little breakfast, but excitement robbed her of appetite; and then it was so hot, so heavy, sultry and still.

She received quite a shock as Harold rose from the table.

"It's just possible, mother, I can get back for dinner."

"Oh," she said, almost faintly, "I did not think you could manage to leave the office."

"Neither did I, but . . perhaps it is not convenient?"

"It would mean a re-arrangement, certainly."

She felt so much at stake, that she clutched at a desperate courage.

"All right," he said; his eyes, as usual, avoiding hers. "I'll get my lunch in town. I may be home a bit earlier than yesterday."

Her heart thumped heavily during the next few minutes. She was thankful to see him go up the road to the station.

When, at last, it was really time for her to start, she felt almost sick with excitement. Her fingers fumbled over hooks and eyes. The white muslin dress, with its touches of rosy colour—she decided they were not very noticeable—was a close fit certainly, and caught her breath; but she dared not call up the maid to help her to fasten it. If only she could slip out unobserved, and get home in time to change before Harold saw her! . . . The hat must needs be black. She regretted it; but perhaps it would serve to carry off the dress. She donned her

Sunday hat, with a purple feather in it, a hat entirely unsuitable for a day in Netherby Shaw, but one which, in her eyes, was most becoming. A black lace scarf and a white silk parasol completed her attire; and she slipped downstairs with infinite precautions, to run into Annie, cleaning the front door steps. By the rule of the house, this should have been done at least an hour ago, and she vented her startled annoyance on the girl, reproving her somewhat sharply.

Annie, without replying, fixed her eyes on the pink waistband, and her mistress at once descended to self-defence.

"I've had to put on this old dress, because of the heat. I'm going now to see the dressmaker, and have a little black satin put about it. I shan't be in for dinner."

She put up her parasol, and opened the gate.

"I did that very well," she thought, complacently. She did not see Annie's slow, malicious smile follow her down the street.

"I must not get flustered," Dolly said to

herself. "I shall only get all in a heat and feel upset. If I don't keep quiet, I shan't enjoy myself."

She turned, as soon as possible, into the fields. She was somewhat conscious, on the main road, of her attire, and she feared lest the grimy dust should mar her freshness. In the Hollow Lane between Darley Wood and the river, Metcalfe awaited her. She forgot all save his kiss, and hurried towards him. He was seated on a stile, from which, as she advanced, he slowly descended. His pockets bulged with various packages, and he also carried a net and killing-bottle.

Horace Metcalfe, as well as Dolly, had passed a restless night; but his cogitations had been different from hers. He had not experienced rapture, but rather discomfort. He wondered if he had not been a little reckless.

"Going a bit too fast," he had meditated. "Must put the brake on to-morrow and keep it on. I'm not going to let myself be run away with."

He sighed, for the little spin had been

very pleasant; but he did not want to smash up. He had watched other fools do that. Accordingly, his approach was leisurely. He greeted Dolly with just sufficient warmth; his eyes were eloquent; but his lips were not at her service.

"Not here, little woman," he said hastily.

She did not permit herself to feel aggrieved. She was too determined to enjoy the day.

"Later on," she thought, "when we come to Netherby Shaw."

Meanwhile, he scanned her with a dubious smile:

"Well, I see you have not come prepared for rain. Let us hope the weather will be favourable."

About twelve o'clock, walking by the river side, they came to Netherby Bridge. On the other side of the Bridge was the Bowling Green Inn, where toll was collected from all who crossed the Bridge. It was, as Dolly had said, an old-world place; the red-tiled roof was mellowed with many-tinted lichen growths; the windows, diamond paned, and heavily leaded, showed

more than one coat-of-arms among the diamonds.

Behind the Inn was a velvet-swarded green, surrounded by rustic arbours in clipped box, where, seated before a tankard of home-brewed ale, the local loungers might watch the ancient game which, as all the world knows, confounded the Spanish Armada. There was also a skittle-alley, almost historic; and there was a wonderful Jacobean kitchen, with an open fireplace, set with old blue tiles, the envy of collectors.

Dolly had often desired to see the interior, but Arnold, a total abstainer, would not set his foot across the threshold. True, afternoon tea was served in the famous kitchen, but that was merely an easy way to sin. The house was licenced for the sale of intoxicating liquors. That was enough, more than enough indeed, for Arnold Armitage.

They passed the Inn, and leaving the river bank, went down a gradual slope by a winding field path, then, over a couple of stiles to Netherby Shaw.

A little tributary of the Darle, a thread-like, sparkling stream, ran at the bottom of the wooded dell. Forget-me-not grew along the water's edge, and foxglove nodded higher up the bank. There was shade of hornbeam, oak and sycamore; there were tangled mazes of wild rose and honeysuckle. Everywhere, creeping along the uneven ground, were blackberry trails with blossoms white and pink, that caught at Dolly's skirt with elvish talons.

Half down the slope they found a fallen tree, where they sat to rest and enjoy the woodland scene. Dolly removed her hat which was rather heavy, and, she instinctively felt, rather unsuitable. She looked at Metcalfe, Metcalfe looked at her. He took her hand in his, and pressed it gently; but he had himself under control. He saw in her eyes a deepening tenderness, observed as a danger signal. To distract her, he made a great stir of unpacking lunch, ticking off his various parcels, and disburdening his pockets. It was, indeed, an admirable lunch, and Dolly, healthily hungry, enjoyed it heartily.

After lunch, they dipped their fingers in the stream, and then, stretching himself at Dolly's feet, Metcalfe drew a green volume from his pocket. He had not yet kissed her, and did not intend to do so. He hit on the clever device of reading aloud.

"What shall be said between us here,
Among the downs, between the trees,
In fields that knew our feet last year,
In sight of quiet lands and seas,
This year, Félise?"

At first she felt inclined to disappointment; then the melodious lines and the mellow voice of the reader lulled her senses. She closed her eyes, leaning back to the tree behind her. The wonder, beauty and regret of love, breathed in the music of harmonious verse, seemed to permeate her being.

She could not comprehend? No, but she *apprehended*. She laid the lesson to her passionate heart; she hungered anew for the best the passing moment had to yield, she admitted the inevitable end. Such moments of insight, rare to the highly gifted, come perhaps once in a lifetime to such as

Dolly; to some they come not at all. In that hour she attained the pinnacle of her being, touched her highest level of sensibility. She was made one with the beauty and sorrow of love. Never before! Never, never again!

He paused and looked up at her. Her face was rapt. Her eyes were closed; tears trembled on the lids. In spite of himself he was moved by her emotion. He turned the page, and read on.

"Take hands and part with laughter,
Touch lips and part with tears;
Once more, and no more after,
Whatever bring the years"

He heard her breathing alter, grow rapid, agitated. He took her hand again and felt it—cold. More stirred than he knew, he read on, with deepening tenderness, clearer insight.

He looked up at her again at the end of the poem, and wondered. The day had grown strangely still, and that seemed fitting. He noted it without any mental comment.

No birds were singing; there was not a breath of air. He heard only Dolly's hurried, agitated breathing, and the beating of his own heart. When he turned the page and began to read again, his voice was shaken, and had lost its mellowness:

"Ah one thing worth beginning,
One thread in life worth spinning,
Ah sweet, one sin worth sinning
With all the whole soul's will;
To lull you till one stilled you,
To kiss you till one killed you,
To feed you till one filled you,
Sweet lips, if love could fill—"

He read no more. Perhaps it was as well. He read no more, for she opened her eyes, looked at him . . . Oh, they stood on the very brink of precipice, stood clasped, heart upon heart, and lip on lip. She was terrible in her passion, this dull, middle-aged woman! Her lips were insatiable, her kisses burned, her arms refused to release him—and then, a sudden peal of thunder rolled, a muttering, slow crescendo, that ended on a crash.

Dolly was terribly frightened. In an orthodox, unimaginative way she was quite superstitious. The thunder was still to her the voice of an angry God. She had never heard of the One-Eyed, with his Hammer; her God was Jah-veh, that old Jewish Avenger, who drove with the flaming sword of his Archangel the first unhappy sinners out of Eden. Now the sword was directed at her guilty heart; it searched her under the hornbeams, through the thickets. She shook with physical terror and superstitious dread.

Metcalfe, also decidedly startled, was both thankful and amazed.

"By Jove," he muttered, "that was a narrow shave!"

And the danger that had been so imminent was in a moment impossible and remote.

"We must get into shelter," he said somewhat abruptly. "It is not safe under the trees—besides, it is going to pour."

"Where can we go?" asked Dolly, desperately. "There's only the Inn, and that's across two fields."

"If you hurry up, you'll get there before the rain."

"But the lightning, Horace!"

"Oh, well, we'll have to risk it. Or would you rather stay and get it here?"

She glanced at him, startled by his change of tone, and prepared to follow him without further parley. In her haste, getting over the stile, she tore her dress. Her hat, hurriedly donned, held an insecure anchorage on her dishevelled hair. Heated and breathless, she felt, and looked, alas! a middle-aged woman, masquerading as a girl, a rather naughty girl.

Across the fields the forked lightning followed them. She cowered at every flash, and trembled at the repeated peals of thunder. Metcalfe, walking before her, displayed a bad-tempered back which completed her distress.

"Oh why," she wondered, "is he so strange to me? It's not my fault that it's come on to rain! If only he'd give me his arm!"

While they were traversing the second

field, the rain began in earnest, a tropical downpour. Metcalfe turned and, catching Dolly by the arm, ran with her towards the Inn. They had no thought now beyond getting under cover. As they passed the outbuildings, they ran into one of the ostlers of the Inn.. He was going to the paddock to bring in one of the horses, terrified by the lightning. His face, as he passed them, was vaguely familiar to Dolly, but she could not remember where she had seen him before. As for him, he paused and stared at her, open-mouthed. She saw his eyes fixed boldly, almost impudently, upon her, and shrank a little nearer her companion.

"How he stares!" she said, resentfully. "Did you notice?"

"Don't wonder," answered Metcalfe, irritably.

Into the picturesque Jacobean kitchen, all polished brass, blue tiles and old, black oak, broke this bedraggled pair of modern lovers, wet, breathless, on the verge of angry quarrel. The man had the advan-

tage of the two. No masculine garb has the charm of feminine draperies, but in a rainstorm there are compensations. Metcalfe was dripping, heated and very sulky; but he had not torn his garments on the stile, nor imprinted a patch of green on spotless raiment; nor had his hair come down, leaving his hat afloat on the rude breeze, and insecurely tugging at its moorings.

Dolly caught sight of herself in a little round mirror hanging on one of the walls. She was shocked, but almost relieved. She understood now why that man had stared so strangely. There had been no sinister intention in his gaze. With trembling hands she set herself to rights, while Metcalfe ordered tea.

"Perhaps," said the waitress kindly, "the lady would like to have a proper tidy up. There's a room upstairs where you can have hot water."

"Oh, if you please!" said Dolly, gratefully.

But before she could leave the room a terrible thing occurred, one of those unforeseen coincidences with which the mocking

Fates deride unhappy mortals. Another pedestrian, dripping, out of breath, invaded the peace of the Jacobean kitchen—just in the doorway she ran into Mr. Varley.

So aghast was she, she stood and stared at him, while he glared at her his most aggressive glare, and tried to remember if he ought to know her. He had lapses lately in his memory and bitter grudges against his old acquaintance. But he could not pretend he did not see this lady, and her face . . . surely her face was quite familiar. Embarrassment held him blocking the narrow doorway, while he looked at her and looked at Mr. Metcalfe, and entirely failed to associate the two. At last, with a long-drawn sigh, almost a sob, she sidled past him and hurried after the waitress. In that moment he remembered who she was—her relationship to old Mr. Armitage, and with a flash of uncomfortable insight, he wondered what was happening to him lately. He called after her,

"Madam! Mrs. Armitage!"

She heard him, and fled down the passage and up the stairs.

He turned his puzzled gaze on Horace Metcalfe.

"Do I understand, Sir, that lady is with you? I don't seem to connect her with you, Sir. I know your face. But you are not her husband, the son of my old friend, Mr. Armitage? No?"

Horace Metcalfe returned him a quite expressionless gaze, and did not answer. He flattered himself there was no one to overhear the awkward question.

Mr. Varley, finding no reply forthcoming, fell into one of his sudden reveries, while the waitress, who seemed acquainted with his habits, brought him a glass of hot milk and placed it before him. While he sipped it, he fixed his eyes once more on Metcalfe, drew his brows together in a puzzled frown, and muttered disjointed phrases to himself.

Upstairs, alone in the bedroom, Dolly was weeping.

"Oh, dear, I don't know whatever I shall do! I thought I was going to have such a lovely day! I never get any little

pleasure out of life like other women. It's all dull drudgery, one day like another. Oh dear, I wonder what will happen next! Must I stay up here till he's gone? What can I do? Horace will be so angry; as if it was my fault!"

After a time she heard a knock at the door, and started, almost terrified, to her feet. The girl had come to tell her tea was ready. She prepared to go downstairs, bathing her eyes and carefully tidying her hair. She entered the blue-tiled room with furtive eyes and frightened face, guilt written large all over her. Fortunately, there was none to see. Mr. Varley had drunk his milk and left the room. Her relief was almost a shock.

Metcalfe, pouring out tea, was inly fuming; angry with Dolly, furious with himself, tired of the whole affair. And over tea, of course, they began to quarrel.

"Oh, Horace, do you think he recognised me?"

"Of course, he recognised you. Could not help it. You stood and waited till he *had* to see you. I thought women were supposed to be quick-witted."

"Oh dear, what shall we do?"

"How can I tell you? There's one good thing—he did not recognise me. He can't drop any venom on my good name."

"But, Horace! What about me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Very likely the old fool won't say anything at all. If he does, you must face it out—give him the lie."

"Oh, I wish we'd never come!"

"Well, you know, *I* never advised it, did I now? It was only to satisfy you."

"You consented—you seemed pleased."

"That's what women always say. They nag and nag till you give them what they want; and then, when it does not answer, turn round and blame you."

"But Horace, truly, I'm not blaming you! It's no more your fault than mine . . ."

"Oh, that's enough! It's no good arguing. Drink your tea and let us go."

The storm, with lengthened mutterings, withdrew. There was promise of a fairer interval, though not of long duration. Both Metcalfe and Dolly were anxious to set forth, to bring to a close their disappointing day,

to recover composure; if possible, to forget. But the homeward way was long, the sky still threatening, and Dolly, in her draggled finery, was even more conspicuous than before. Neither she nor Metcalfe desired to court attention. She was thankful when he proposed to hire a trap and departed without delay to make arrangements.

A very few minutes sufficed. The trap was at the door; the ostler, hastily trimmed, holding the horse's head; a dark rug in readiness to cover Dolly's dress. And again, as Metcalfe lent her a hand to get in, she encountered that impudent, half-familiar stare as the ostler turned in his seat to receive instructions.

Very soon, the Inn, the Bridge, the fields were left behind. She looked back on the scene of anticipated bliss; on the tree tops, already dropping below the horizon, which overarched her earthly Paradise; all was melancholy, desolate; a dejected landscape under a darkening heaven.

She sought Metcalfe's hand under cover of the rug. He pressed it, then released it,

withdrawing his own. She sought his eyes; they were fixed on things afar.

As soon as they came to the Darley Heath main road, before a single cottage was in sight, Metcalfe bade the driver stop, and at once got out. His discretion lashed her like a sudden blow; but she could not expostulate, dared not trust her voice to speak. They nodded mute farewells, and he gained the path. Soon he, like all the rest, was left behind. Her dream had been shattered; harsh reality remained. She stared at the ostler's back, biting her lips, and the man half-turned, winked at her with a leer, and jerked a backward thumb in Metcalfe's direction. Then he turned, and drove on without further sign or sound.

Scanning the front of the house with anxious eyes, she noted Annie, drawn by the unerring instinct of her class, reconnoitring discreetly behind the drawing room curtains. As Dolly perceived her, she faded like a vision, and appeared, red-faced, in answer to the bell.

She discovered the ostler had followed her to the door.

"Here! I say! You've forgotten summat, missus, haven't you?"

She turned back all confused, and shrinking from him.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

He winked, and extended his hand.

"But you have been paid already. What do you want?"

"Thirsty weather, missus. Long way back again."

"Certainly not!" she cried, alarmed and angry, and, only anxious to be rid of him, darted quickly past Annie, into the house.

"Oh yes!" the fellow called after her, with a leer. "*'E* paid me, in course, your gentleman paid me missus, I forgot!"

"Annie!" cried Dolly sharply, "why don't you shut the door? Can't you see the man is drunk?"

Annie, demure, with downcast lids, obeyed. The man, with a curse, cut savagely at his

horse, which quickly carried him out of sight and hearing.

Dolly, more dead than alive, but declining any assistance, wearily climbed the stairs to her own room.

IX.

RUNNING DOWNHILL

She could not, would not give herself time to think. A black dress dangled behind the bedroom door, like the pendant corpse of outraged decency. The muslin of her transgression, stained, bedraggled, she thrust, all wet and crumpled as it was, into the bottom of an empty trunk that stood in the darkest corner of the box-room. She could never wear it again. Re-habited in the garb of her profession, she became to outward appearance a decent matron.

Then she flung herself on her knees beside her bed; but in vain—she could not pray. Pray! For what? To whom? She, outcast, guilty soul against whose sin Heaven had with awful thunder denounced stern condemnation—confessed her guilt, bowed

her head in shame and fear, and already only longed to sin again!

Her husband returned at the appointed date, and Dolly became engrossed in domestic affairs. Chapel and social engagements filled her time. It was a relief, and yet she fretted at it. When she paused to think, she felt herself vaguely menaced. She had a sense of danger, imminent danger, and knew not from what direction to expect it. The ostler's impudent leer haunted her dreams. She feared to yield to slumber lest she should babble. The eyes of her son seemed to avoid and reproach her. He knew nothing, could know nothing, yet she feared him. Above all, the thought that Mr. Varley might betray her, the knowledge that she could not contradict him, could only blunder in a maze of obvious lies, filled day and night with dread.

As for Horace's unkindness, she dared not think of it. The memory brought her to the verge of tears.

She expected a busy week-end, for there

was an " exchange of pulpits " at the Chapel; and it fell to the Armitages to entertain the visiting Minister. On Saturday she was deep in preparation, when Annie suddenly asked to speak with her.

Since that little episode at the front door step, she had been ill at ease in Annie's presence; inclined to asperity due to nervousness, or deprecating, according to her mood. She gave a start, being suddenly addressed, and turned on the girl, as if in self-defence.

" Do you need to worry me now? " she demanded sharply. " You can see I'm up to my eyes in this currant tart."

" I only wanted to ask you to let me have Sunday off. The afternoon, I mean, after I've washed the dishes."

" Have Sunday off! repeated Dolly, astounded; " *this* Sunday, to-morrow? But that's impossible! Dr. French, and Miss Laura and Grandpa here to dinner, and three of the Deacons coming in to supper! It's out of the question! "

" I'm sorry it's inconvenient," persisted Annie; " but I wish, ma'am, you could see your way to it."

"Well, I can't," said Dolly, "so there's an end of it."

The girl drew a little nearer to Dolly's elbow.

"I have practically promised my young man. He's a groom, you know, at the Bowling Green Hotel."

The two women stood, regarding each other in silence. There was no mistaking the look on either face. Dolly was no adept in concealing her feelings, and it served the handmaiden's turn to point *her* meaning. After a pause, the mistress—the nominal mistress—issued her ultimatum, ashen-lipped.

"You will take a month's notice, Annie, from to-day."

"Oh no, Mrs. Armitage," replied the girl, "I can't take that; I see no reason for it. I shall appeal to Mr. Armitage."

Dolly hurriedly left the room, fearing to burst into tears. She understood then, why the man's face had been so familiar. He

had called for Annie on one of her Sundays out; but, habited in decent Sunday black, had appeared a quiet respectable working man, and had in no wise attracted her attention.

No further reference was made to Sunday, but, after washing up the dinner things, Annie set forth in a dazzling muslin dress, and did not re-appear till ten o'clock. Thence-forward Dolly knew herself at her mercy.

Another Sunday! Another trying Sunday! These Sundays, still the pivot of her existence, had been, until lately, the pleasantest days of her life. Sunday had struck the chord of the ensuing week, not only mentally and spiritually, but socially as well. There are still those who, like the Armitages, feel that man has been created for the Sabbath, for its due observance, and pious, devout enjoyment. Their attitude, neither morbid nor insincere, was sweetly expressed three hundred years ago:

" Sundays the pillars are,
On which Heaven's palace archéd lies :
And other days fill up the spare
And hollow room with vanities.
They are the fruitful beds and borders
In God's rich garden. That is bare
Which parts their fruitful ranks and orders."

But, now, alas, for her,

" The brightness of that day
Was sullied by her foul offence."

She had no palate for its pure enjoyment, disliked and dreaded it. Its publicity constituted an ordeal, its significance a reproach ; its nature of domestic piety was all at odds with her new mode of life. She would enter the House of Prayer, swayed by one thought—Will he be there to-day ? If he were, she feared lest her passion might betray her, and hardly dared a glance in his direction ; her heart beat painfully, her fingers shook, the colour ebbed and flowed

in her too-conscious cheek. If he were not, her disappointment choked her; life had no meaning; all was cold and dead; she wearied of the vapid stream of words, the empty prayers, the hollow-sounding praise.

On this particular Sunday, he was absent. Perhaps, she told herself, it was as well. If he had frowned on her, could she have borne it? She needed all her courage for the day. Afterwards she would see him, tell him all that had occurred—the ostler's impudence, Annie's insubordination, the lurking danger in the association of the two. She would tell him, and he would advise her what to do. Unless indeed—thought charged with agony—he had gone from home again, gone indefinitely! Just when she felt so defenceless, threatened, fearful! Oh, that were too unkind! He would not, could not do such a cruel thing!

After dinner, while Grandpa dozed in an easy chair, Laura came and sat by her mother with a book. The Minister, Arnold and Harold were bound for the P.S.A.; Patty and Frank had departed to Sunday School.

The house was quiet with Sabbatic calm; a pleasant, sunlit hush whispered peace to fretted nerves. Instinctively, mother and daughter sat silent for a while.

After a time she felt Laura's eyes were on her, and in a flash her doubts and fears revived. Why did Laura look at her so curiously. What did she suspect or guess? Unconsciously, into her eyes came a look of dull resentment, hunted, furtive.

"Mother," said Laura, speaking quietly on account of Grandpa, "I think you really need a holiday. It will be a good thing when you get away from here."

"Get away from here—What do you mean?"

"When you go to the sea, of course—What else could I mean?"

"That's precious little holiday for me."

"But you always say you enjoy it. It does you good."

"How you harp on it, child. I'm feeling perfectly well."

"You don't look it. You look . . . "

"Well—what?"

"Not like yourself. Excited—nervous. Is anything the matter?"

"What should be the matter?"

"I don't know—I only wondered."

Laura folded her hands and looked down at the book on her knee.

"Do you know—I think Mr. Varley is going mad."

She felt her mother's sudden nervous bound, heard the quick catch in her breathing.

"*Mad?*" said Dolly.

"Well, he calls to see Grandpa, you know, from time to time. And he called the other day—and he said—he *said*—he'd seen *you* in a pink and white dress, one afternoon, at the Bowling Green Inn by the river . . . If *that* is not madness!—I told him, of course, he had been entirely mistaken. It vexed him. He knows he's always making mistakes. He can't bear anyone to notice them."

"How absurd!" said Dolly faintly. She paused in thought. She longed to ask what more Mr. Varley had said. But she dared

not ask. Her daughter seemed waiting for something, some reassurance.

"I was never there in my life," she feebly declared.

Laura permitted herself a sidelong glance, and bent her eyes again, thoughtfully, on the book.

"I knew you'd say that," she remarked, and turned the page.

Dolly made up her mind that Laura knew everything, just as she had already decided that Harold knew. She was mistaken in both instances, but her judgment was at the mercy of her fears.

The vague suspicion she might easily have dispelled, she most industriously set to work to confirm. For, Oh, she was not at ease in her new rôle! She had not the eyes nor the tongue of the deceiver. To play both husband and lover passed her powers; and —strange how emotion plays such tricks with ethics!—her husband's caresses became repugnant to her, a kind of legitimised immorality. From this grew terror lest he should notice a difference; from terror the

arts of an unskilled courtesan; from them again, self-loathing and disgust. She knew not what way to turn to save her self-respect. She feared herself, her husband, children, servant; while her passion for her lover grew explicit, and insisted, in all the pulses of her blood, that nothing else was of the least account. Meanwhile, Metcalfe was silent—gave no sign. She wrote and remained unanswered. She felt she must go mad and babble all! Oh, her nonconformist conscience pressed her hard! She paid for her hour of rapture, paid with interest!

A fortnight passed. She resolved to brave his anger. Twice she waited at the trysting-place, and twice returned in deep despondency. Then she set forth to call on him, at his own house.

Mr. Metcalfe was at home. She was admitted. She gave no name—said a lady wished to speak to him.

Metcalfe was busy with an antiquarian friend, arranging flint arrow-heads in the

library. He frowned at the interruption and the message.

"Ladies who call in a morning and give no name, almost invariably mean subscriptions. Go and ask her to leave a message, say what she wants."

The maid obeyed and presently returned.

"The lady says Mrs. Armitage has sent her."

Her identity flashed on him unpleasantly. Despite himself, he reddened with sudden annoyance.

"Don't let me keep you, Metcalfe," said his friend. "I'll be sorting these arrowheads while you are gone."

"I suppose," said Metcalfe, ungraciously, "I must see her. I shan't let her keep me long."

She had quite expected he might be "put about." She had seen men angry before, knew them unreasonable. Most men have tempers they have never learned to control; are "easy enough to manage when not thwarted." The height of ill-manage-

ment is to oppose their humour, or cherish independent thought and action.

Old Mr. Holt had had a docile wife. But on occasions, brief and terrible, he had stamped and raged and sworn and slammed the doors, while his gentle wife had pursued his furious progress, with deprecating hands and those mild words which are no infallible antidote to wrath. Arnold Armitage too entertained his private demon; but his was a Christian, Chapel-going demon, that never stamped nor raged nor slammed the doors, but rankled silently—on principle. He always had justification for his anger. So concealed was it, so secret and persistent, it was like the smouldering of a hidden beam, unsuspected till the flame breaks through the roof-tree.

And Horace Metcalfe also had a temper. He "hated to be made ridiculous." When once this particular madness has taken root, it is marvellous on what trifles it will fatten. Given a man without any sense of humour, and a somewhat inflated sense of his own importance—the occasions for ridicule are innumerable.

Dolly read all his anger in his eyes. Her own eyes dimmed; she quailed and shrank away. She would fain have fled the presence she had importuned.

"Mrs. Armitage," he began impatiently, "what is the meaning of this new piece of folly?"

"Oh, Horace!" she gasped. "How can you be so unkind? After all that's been between us—Oh, it's cruel!"

"Be careful, please!" he said sharply, and glancing at the door. "You may be overheard."

"I don't care if I am."

"I know! I have heard you say the same before. Well, bear in mind, I *do* care, care very greatly. I have no desire to look ridiculous."

"Oh, Horace, why did you not answer my last letter?"

"I have not had time."

"Oh that's not true—not true! You're tired of me! You don't love me any longer! You've been amusing yourself with me—that's all!"

She sank down on the sofa, uplifted her voice, and wept.

"Come! Come!" said Metcalfe, alarmed on a new account. "I must really ask you to control yourself! I shall call in the maid and tell her you are in hysterics. I really must consider appearances."

"You never consider anything else," she sobbed.

"Nonsense, Dorothy, nonsense! What are you saying."

Perforce he must take her hand, soothe and caress her into quietness.

"What nonsense you're talking. Of course I care for you; too much to allow you to run any foolish risks. Remember it's on your account entirely . . . "

"Oh, yes," she said, "you've told me that already."

He glanced at her askance, somewhat surprised. Love is supposed to be blind—but one never knows!

"You must listen to me," she said. "It is important. Something has happened."

She told him all about Annie and the

ostler, then spoke of Mr. Varley's visit to Grandpa; of what Laura had reported of his gossip.

"Did he mention me?" asked Metcalfe.

"She did not say so."

"Did you ask her?"

"No. That would have given everything away."

He took one or two turns up and down the room, perplexed; then sat beside her again, and drew her hand in his. He must be very careful, very tactful, very suave.

"Now, listen," he said. "I don't want to be unkind! But these things you have told me convince me more than ever that we must manage our affairs more prudently. We have arrived at a—well—at an *impasse*. We can't go back on what has been between us, as you say. It is equally certain we can't go any further—Don't interrupt me, Dorothy, I beg!—We shall always continue, I hope, to be good friends. I don't desire to lose sight of you, Dorothy, but I can't and won't be dragged into a scandal. Why, damn it all! What must old Varley think?

Just in this manner *his* affair began. Walks and talks in the fields—a pleasant friendship —maybe a kiss exchanged! And then, consider how Brentnall got let in!"

"But you said—"

"Never mind what I said! The point is this, we have got to be very careful for the future—*very* careful."

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Dolly rising.

He got on his feet, relieved, deluded by her calmness.

"That's all! and you'll go home and think it over. You've listened very patiently, little woman. But you know it's for your sake as well as mine."

"Yes," said Dolly, "I have listened—patiently."

A curious flame grew in her quiet eyes, a curious tenseness in her low-toned voice.

"I have listened. I can give you my answer now. I can't just let things drop without going further. I can't be careful, prudent and discreet. I was happy once and contented—or thought I was. You came and

showed me how many things I'd missed—all the grand things you've known about all your life; the things that have made you so clever and superior! I can't go back again where I was before. It will never be the same, never again. I seem to be seeing it all for the very first time, and I see how small it is, how mean and poor. And love? I fancied I was fond of Arnold! So I was in a way. Now—now I hate him! I've had your kisses—I can't go back to his—they make me shudder! Oh, I know it's wicked, but can't you understand? You did that day! Another minute and I'd have been all yours."

All that was foolish, commonplace, middle-class fell away from her as she stood, her arms outspread, the thrill of passion vibrant in her speech, the woman—primitive—pleading her right to love, her old eternal claim to sacrifice. Something a little nobler than his cowardice responded. A sudden vertigo mounted to his brain, brief, passionate, mad, but sweet — Oh bitter-sweet! Her lips were on his again, her ardent lips!

Between her kisses she entreated him wildly, with incoherent, piteous phrase—for, at a touch of love, she was all child again—to take her away with him, somewhere, anywhere, far from the known, the familiar, sad routine; far away from husband, family and home; from weekly drudgery, week-end piety, all the ugliness and emptiness of life.

And then, exhausted, she was weeping quietly, and he was explaining, patiently explaining, that they really must be prudent and discreet. He felt in his heart that this was their farewell. Their summer madness, for him, had reached its climax; had gone as far as he dared let go. Why pursue it through its tedious slow decline? But he put her off with caresses and promises.

"Have patience! Wait! Give me time to consider matters."

"But Horace, think! In two or three weeks we shall be away. Arnold, myself and the children—all of us. We shall be away five weeks! I can't endure it! Can't anything be arranged?"

"Hush! Calm yourself!" he replied. "Let

us wait till your return. Too many eyes are on us to meet at present. Later, dear Dorothy . . . "

He talked her out of the house.

"Thank heaven!" he thought, as he watched her turn the corner, "I have five, no, seven weeks respite. It was time! Anything may happen in seven weeks! And yet," he mused, remembering her kisses, "if it were not that one would cut such a ludicrous figure . . But a woman with grown-up children! It's absurd!"

He went to his cupboard and poured out a glass of wine, mopped his brow and examined himself in the glass. Then he returned to arranging his arrow-heads.

X.

THE THIRD WHEEL

The first of August fell that year on a Thursday, and all the end of the week was filled with the tumult and whirl of exodus. The Armitage family, like their neighbours, went from home. They paid an annual visit of five weeks to one of the watering places of the Isle of Man. Dolly, Patty and Frank were to stay the whole five weeks; Harold and Mr. Armitage, however, could not be spared so long. Mr. Armitage, therefore went for the first two weeks, and Harold for the remainder of the time. In his father's absence, Harold stayed at Silverdale, Fotheringay Villa being closed meanwhile. The furniture was swathed in dusting sheets, and the silver and plate were deposited at the Bank.

It was decided, mainly by herself, that

Laura must stay behind to look after Grandpa. He was getting too feeble and childish to be left; and though Harold, and later her father, would be there to take a certain responsibility, Laura's own presence seemed desirable.

Family holidays did not appeal to Laura, who hated the Isle of Man in the month of August; the crowded beach, the throngs of vulgar trippers, the stuffy lodging-house bedroom shared with Patty. And Dolly, for reasons entirely different, declined to urge her daughter against her will. It was, indeed, a relief to leave her behind, though she wondered sometimes, with a sinking heart, what Laura and Harold might say of her in her absence.

They said little on that point or any other. Their natures were uncongenial, and both were reserved. Only once was there a hint at confidence, and that on Bank Holiday when they went out together for a spin on their bicycles far into the country.

It was just at the entry of the Hollow Lane, they came across Metcalfe and his pickle jar.

"How I detest that fellow!" said Harold, lowering.

"Why?" asked Laura. "I thought he was interesting. Patty and Frank say he's full of wonderful stories."

"Patty and Frank don't see him as *I* see him."

"And how is that?"

He only gloomed in silence, and, long after Horace Metcalfe was out of sight, turning sharply on his sister, said abruptly,

"I hope *you'll* never be bewitched by him."

"I'm not easily bewitched," said Laura, calmly. "Is he so fascinating?"

"Not to me."

To further questioning he was grimly silent, stirring a flock of conjectures in her brain.

On one point, Dolly's mind was more at ease. Annie, at very short notice, had left her service. She had in fact, drawn her wages over-night, and in the morning packed her box and gone. However improper this

method of procedure, her departure was an exquisite relief. Dolly neither knew nor inquired her reason for it, though later she heard that the girl had left to get married. She considered her gone for ever out of her life, and gladly banished her from memory. She did not see Metcalfe again before leaving Darley Bridge; but she took with her into her exile his gracious permission to write to him sometimes—not more than once a week.

Poor Dolly! all her heart was in those letters! Every day, perched on a campstool on the beach, she filled whole pages with her protestations, lamentations and professions of devotion. While she sat engrossed in a dream world of her own, the others boated and bathed, and sauntered along the shore. About her was a din of merriment, loud-voiced, Philistian, strident merriment—nigger minstrels, fortune tellers, donkey races. It did not disturb her; she was not aware of it. Dim, far-away it seemed, unreal and vague! And once a week she dispatched the bulky missive; then followed

its journey over sea and land to the breakfast table of Nineteen Ellesmere Road, to the white, well-manicured hands of Horace Metcalfe, to a secret nest of lavender and blue ribbon—Never, never to its ultimate destination, which was the kitchen grate on Sunday night, when the maid had gone to Church. Ruthless then, poker in hand, Metcalfe would stir and turn the curling pages, till every foolish, tender, dangerous word was utterly consumed by lapping flame. Those long, long letters! How they wearied him! He came to hate the very look of them.

Laura, left behind at Silverdale, was very well contented. She found herself, more than ever, her own mistress. She had a large airy bedroom, handsomely furnished, and opening off it, overlooking the garden, a little sitting room for her own use. It had been redecorated to her fancy, and furnished with pretty modern Sheraton. In the escritoire she kept letters, papers and diary. On the bookshelf were ranged her

French novels, safe from intrusion; novels whose very backs would have had them banished from the sober precincts of her father's house. She corresponded frequently with Minna, whose letters, in vivacious, fluent French, carried her fancy far from Darley Bridge to a world of wild romance and sensational adventure. Minna's life was developing in stormy fashion. Newly betrothed, she cherished a secret lover, and looked forward to marriage to shelter her intrigue. The Madonna of the flax-flowers was forgotten for the moment.

Laura's time was very much at her own disposal. Grandpa slept late in the morning and had breakfast in his room. After breakfast he dozed over his newspaper, appearing for the first time in public at the mid-day dinner table. After dinner his man-servant took him out in his bath chair, on which occasions Laura sometimes walked behind him. From tea-time till supper, he became alert, and liked to play dominoes or to be read aloud to, in which recreations Laura

was indispensable to him. He generally retired to bed at nine.

Thus the days succeeded each other very calmly. If Laura at times found them monotonous, she set against that the boon of liberty. She did not try to occupy her leisure; a book or a letter sufficed to entertain her, and she loved to dream the pleasant noonday through. She often sat at the window of her room, her elbows resting on the broad, low sill, her fancy flying far beyond the tree-tops. Below her lay a strip of grass and flowers, the snowy domes of fragrant elder trees, and white and yellow lilies in a row. She was somewhat lethargic and seldom went for a walk; but she often cycled as far as Darley Wood, where, dismounting, she would lie with half-closed lids, glimpsing the clear transparence of the beeches, the blue of summer sky, dappled with cloud, imagining immense emancipations.

The Lover who visits the day dreams of every maiden was no stranger to her musings. The Lover! To the inexperienced girl is

he not life itself, at once invitation and fulfilment, way and goal?

It was towards a wider life that her ardent spirit yearned. It was not the erotic, not the sentimental, it was always the adventurous road that lured her.

"And see ye not that bonny road,
That winds about that fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae."

With true Thomas, she had given her seven good years, to set foot over those enchanted frontiers. Danger rather attracted than deterred her. Deeds stirred her, thrilled her, where sweet words passed her by. The reading of poems, however passionate, had never won a kiss from Laura's lips.

After the general rush to the seaside, great silence settled over Darley Bridge. The streets were almost deserted. Suburban roads, tree-fringed, and heavy with shadow, assumed the secluded calm of

country lanes. Save for the endless funerals passing down Darley Heath Road, traffic there was practically none. In the wide flat fields that bordered the sluggish Darle, the grass stood heavy with seed, purple and brown; red-sorrel made magnificent effect with rusty shadows laid on silvery green. When the south wind brushed the herbage with languid wing, wave followed wave in gorgeous undulation. Splendid butterflies, orange and peacock-eyed, ranged delicately over meadow-sweet and ox-eye. Dragon-flies flashed their iridescent mail; sand martens darted to and fro above the river.

Horace Metcalfe, killing-bottle laid aside, gave himself up to pleasant reveries; wandered out, with well-thumbed volume in his pocket, and forgot to read, dreaming in grass and flowers:

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

He was dreaming thus, some days after Dolly's departure, one radiant morning,

newly laved in dew. Nearly four weeks had gone by since his interview with Dolly. No letter had yet arrived to remind him of her existence, her devotion. For quite a fortnight, he had scarcely thought of her.

He was half-way down the high bank that divides the Darle from the fields, on the meadow side of it; stretched in the dappled shadow of a hedge that was flecked with the creamy clusters of guelder-rose. A man passed, walking along the path above, a man whose figure was familiar. He remembered at once — the ostler from the Inn. He raised his head and watched him, meditative. The man had in his hand a cage in which a linnet hopped. In the other hand was a bag, formed of a large, black kerchief. It was obvious the fellow was bent on liming birds. Mr. Metcalfe loved wild creatures, in spite of his killing-bottle. He watched the man, frowning, but felt he could do nothing. It was not the nesting season; it was August, when the Wild Birds' Protection Act is not in force. To buy the

little prisoner's liberty were but to encourage further enterprise. He lay down again, much perturbed, and closed his eyes. The man got over the stile by the end of the hedge, and, turning away from the path, went down the bank on the far side of the hedge.

He limed more twigs, set the decoy-bird near them in its cage, and then retreated to a prudent distance. The linnet chirruped, and others answered him. Presently there was a terrified, shrill piping and the fluttering beat of desperate struggling wings. A bird was limed.

"Damnable!" said Metcalfe, and sat up, much agitated.

As he did so, someone more courageous than himself approached the man from the opposite direction. A girl's voice, charged with keen, indignant pity, entreated, demanded the prisoner's release. There was a scuffle; the newcomer snatched the decoy-bird's cage, opened the door and cried,

"There! He is free!"

The man caught the limed bird, captive

on its twig, wrung its neck and, with a filthy imprecation, flung the quivering, lifeless body in her face.

Next moment he was lying on his back, counting the stars.

" Stand aside for a moment," said Metcalfe curtly, to Laura.

She obeyed, but could not turn away her eyes. The prostrate fellow rose, charged like a bull, and went down the bank, turning a somersault. He got up, and came on again. She began to feel very sick. Metcalfe had not studied boxing to no purpose, and, moreover, he felt her lustrous eyes applauding him.

Of course, by this, she had recognised her champion. She had never come into personal contact with him, for his absences from home had been too many and too long. She had heard all sorts of curious things about him, mainly from Frank and Patty, but also from others. Most people half admired him, and half disapproved. Their disapproval served but to commend him.

" No doubt," she thought, " he flies above

their heads. A man who has seen the world as he has done, can't fit into their narrow little grooves."

She more than suspected her mother's interest in him. She had read "L'Automme d'une Femme," and knew that such things happen. The very fact that she never referred to the man who had been such a regular visitor through the winter, had set Laura's curiosity to work. And Harold's dislike of him, and old Varley's gossip—for, though Laura had not mentioned the fact to her mother, Mr. Varley, in telling his tale at Silverdale, had got the names of both the characters—all this had intrigued Laura's fancy more than a little. But the adventure in which she now participated thrilled her romantic nature to the core.

'In a mead by the river, the Knight doth encounter the Churl, and delivereth the Lady Fair from vile constraint. Yea, with mighty knocks hath he overcome the Churl, who crawleth, threatening, to his own mean habitation.'

She knew the proper sequel to such stories

—the foeman vanquished, the Lady acclaims the Knight and binds his wounds.

'Grammercy, fair Knight! Let me tend thy grievous hurt."

"Thank you," Metcalfe was saying, "I have only cut my knuckles on his teeth. I don't think he's likely to trouble you again. . . . Your face is familiar," he added. "Where have I seen you before?"

"I've grown up since you saw me last," she replied demurely. "I am Laura Armitage."

There was just a moment's pause.

"Oh yes!" he said, rather awkwardly. "Of course."

"You know my people, but I've been away from home. I was in Switzerland all the early Spring. Now I've come back, I don't live at Fotheringay Villa. I live at Silverdale."

Reassured, he permitted himself another glance. She was strangely beautiful, so his eyes reported. From the Armitage stock how sprang so rare a blossom? Was her soul as alien as her outer form? On the

hint of Switzerland he began to talk, half afraid lest she should prove some pensionnaire, with the mind of newly emancipated schoolgirl.

But suddenly she said, "It is time I was going home. I left my bicycle in a cottage down the lane."

"Let me go with you so far, and see you off. . . . I suppose," he said wistfully as he shook hands with her, "there's little chance of our meeting here again? That fellow's behaviour will have made you nervous."

"With such a champion!" she reproached him, smiling.

"I should like to think it possible," he hinted.

"All things are possible," she remarked sedately, and the swift wheels carried her all too soon from sight.

She went home and wrote a long letter to Minna Varenski. And as she wrote the affair took on new meaning, was shadowed by the wing of destiny, grew eloquent with dim prophetic rumour.

" To-day I have taken a step on a strange, new road. Where will it lead me? Who can foresee the future? It is not an end—it is rather a beginning. I feel I shall see more of my Knight Errant."

XI.

THE CHARIOT OF LOVE

This is not the story of Laura but of her mother. Laura's adventures are but of contingent value, in so far as they cross the track of Dolly's interests, and, in crossing it, produce catastrophe. Perhaps as far as Dolly's affair was concerned, catastrophe was implicit from the first, without the intervention of her daughter.

However that fact may be open for speculation, and however Laura's emotions may have engrossed herself, it is no affair of ours to discuss these matters in detail.

It must be enough to assume that she met her Knight Errant again, as she had foretold; and presently, met him not once or twice, but daily; that she planned her game from the first, and played him exquisitely; fanning a growing flame with delicate, chill breath. His heart had long been like a smouldering

fire, still nursing the capacity for warmth, but slowly settling down on its own ashes. Dolly had come, with a lapful of Autumn leaves; they might have blazed—they did, for a short-lived moment; but even before their vitality was quenched, she damped their flame with sad, despondent tears. The glow was choked with mouldering, useless rubbish that only served to keep the air away. But Laura came like a vestal, in cold hands bearing a spark of the authentic primal fire. Ere she knew it, she had set him all ablaze.

Such exuberance is contagious, but she disguised her warmth. By meeting him daily she encouraged him; but sometimes she would wantonly disappoint him and laugh at his reproaches. A hint of complacence drove her behind her trenches whence, from afar, she taunted his discomfort. So, dangling her charms, yet holding them aloof, she drove his desire down the road she had intended. When he broke through her defences, caught and kissed her, she struggled at first like a furious Amazon,

then, without a hint of yielding, gave him fiery kiss for kiss, writhed from his arms and fled—no sentimentalist, she! Had she studied her mother's tactics and seen their failure, she could not have planned attack more contrary. Cold she was not, but he should not guess her fever. She admired, but had no flatteries for his ear. She never wooed him nor seemed to desire his caresses. She gave him the sense of conquest, but dared him to exult. He felt himself battling to reach her, inch by inch, while she quietly shut all gates on his retreat.

Such were her tactics. How far was her heart engaged? It has been said that adventure beckoned her, and here was adventure worthy her pursuit. Her very emotions were discoveries. What warmth of feeling she had, she took from Metcalfe; for, however she might endeavour to disguise it, his ardour could not leave her unresponsive. But her main affair was not emotional. She guessed him, rightly or wrongly time should show, a man to fling open wide the doors of life.

For a heaven and earth new created, she was ready to repay him with her love. But she had not the instinct of the mating woman. In her own mind, always bent upon the future, she scarcely admitted permanent relations. Marriage itself she regarded as an adventure, without pausing to ask how it might be terminated. Thus even Metcalfe's position was not secure. Should after-years bring some claimant to wider knowledge, some guide to frontiers as yet beyond her horizon, she was capable of transferring her devotion and of finding justification for the act.

The haste with which the situation developed was a potent factor in favour of Metcalfe's suit. Even Laura might have faltered, stopping to think, to examine more closely the actual state of her feelings; while Metcalfe was spurred to accomplish the enterprise, not only by his growing passion for her, but by his desire to hasten fast and far from his ludicrous entanglement with Dolly.

Ah, how foolish he had been! How un-

foreseeing! What a mirage is love-in-idleness! How unthrifty is he who gambles on his emotions! That play-love was like a mesh above his goings, unseen, intangible, vaguely hampering him, constraining him to slow and cautious movements when his ardour urged to passionate abandon.

He was borne ever forward, with increasing dizzy speed, by the swift wheels of Love's victorious chariot; but in that chariot he was still a prisoner, fretting at gossamer bonds forged by his former folly; dependant on Laura for some act of supreme courage to rend the mesh that held him from his desire.

So with unaccustomed haste the curious wooing sped. Where he had walked with the mother, the daughter now daily companioned him. They trod the same grassy paths, rested together under the same trees, culled flowers, the chaplets of their new devotion, in the same fields which had witnessed former vows. And the second hay-harvest was gathered while they dallied. The fields were shorn of their multi-coloured

adornment as a woman, bereft of the charm of second youth, as a man in whose heart the flame of love declines. Remained a wide flat plain, expectant only of winter.

> "Ye have been fresh and green,
> Ye have been filled with flowers."

But Metcalfe forgot to quote verses, forgot to philosophise on life's decay. He only noted the hurrying flight of time, the ever more swiftly approaching term of bliss. Renunciations were not in his code. He had no intention of renouncing Laura. Had she not grown indispensible to him, his life, the crowning desire of all his being?

Only how to accomplish his desire he knew not. A public engagement was impossible. Apart from the inevitable scandal —for he knew quite well how Dolly would take the arrangement—he doubted if Mr. Armitage would consent. Her mother's name had never been breathed between them, but some sort of explanation was required. How much did she know?

The new-shorn fields lay languid in dim September haze. Earth seemed, like a passionate mistress who has yielded all to her lover, still palpitant with recent ecstacy, but exhausted, faint, exhaling slumberous breath.

"In two days." said Laura, "they'll all be home again."

"Two days! And we?"

It was time to come to grips.

"I want you to marry me, Laura."

She shook her head.

"My mother . . . " she said, and her voice broke on the word. For the first time her eyes avoided his, and the colour flushed her cheeks against her will. There was long silence, not without its value. In that silence it almost seemed that all was said, all admitted, all accepted, the ground cleared for further action.

"Do you trust me enough to marry me secretly?"

"Yes, when I come of age."

"Child! When is that?"

"Another two months' time."

"Laura! My sweet one! You mean it?"

"But one condition!"

"To the half of my kingdom, my incomparable one!"

"You will let your house; we shall go away from here—far, far away!"

He stirred; she had her mother's blood in her, after all.

"It is my wish too," he said . . . "I shall go up to London, and make all preparations. When I give you the word, you will come?"

"Yes. I will come."

"You say that so calmly, my dearest one, so coldly! Tell me you care . . . "

"I dare not trust myself."

"Ah, then . . . "

"No, no!" she commanded with her hand. "Not now! Not now!"

Again the silence between them was full of meaning. A lark dropped out of the clouds into the grass. Earth seemed to sigh, voluptuously, profoundly, settling into slumber more serene.

Presently they began to talk again, walking

together towards the Hollow Lane on a last quest of Laura's bicycle. He was not to see her, she said, after that day. She would take no risks. It was she who urged discretion, curbed his ardour, suggested arrangements for the future.

"Two months will soon go by," she assured her lover; "I shall have much to occupy my time."

"And I?" he complained, as she mounted her bicycle.

She loosed a sudden shaft to prick complacence.

"You!" she called over her shoulder, "amuse my mother!"

XII.

CATASTROPHE

The end of August and early days of September witnessed the return of the native to Darley Bridge. Four-wheelers, full of brown-faced families, and topped with heavy luggage, appeared in the streets; blinds were drawn up; silver returned from the Bank; the ways grew populous.

Early in the month, Dolly and her family came home. Laura had spent the previous day preparing Fotheringay Villa for their reception. No successor to Annie had, as yet, been appointed, but an excellent char-woman had been engaged.

All was in readiness when the cab drew up before the gate, and with tumult began to disgorge its ruddy inmates. Frank and Patty were overflowing with youthful spirits, Harold sober as ever, but tanned and healthy.

Dolly, whose skin was thin and sensitive, was freckled and brick-red with exposure to the sun. Her eyes, in the conflagration of her face, were almost preternaturally blue. They had an eager look, an anxious asking look, that hurt her daughter.

"Time it ended," Laura said to herself.

Dolly had come home full of excellent intentions. The tonic action of sea air and sunshine had physically braced and strengthened her. Her absence from Metcalfe had given her time to think; to recover, in some degree, her self-control. She had reviewed the past, and seen where she had failed. Though her letters had merely summarised her weakness, she had resolved to banish it from her actions. She would be careful, prudent, wise, discreet. Her coming-on disposition had stood her in evil stead; she would resist it. She would lay to heart the ancient, trusty maxims—to adopt a coy demeanour, cold and distant; to be the pursued, but never to be the pursuer; to set a higher value on herself. Then she asked herself, with a sudden stab of pain,

could she ever bring her heart to such a course? To refuse his kiss, when her lips were thirsty for it, be late at tryst when her heart was winged with passion?

"It won't be so easy," she thought, "but in the end . . . "

The end! Imagination faltered there, and absorbed itself again in considering ways and means.

Eager to put her new-found wisdom to the test, she learned, within a week of her arrival, that Horace Metcalfe had gone from home again. Gone! Without a word, a line of warning! Instinctively, she sat down to write to him. Then she remembered —Where was her resolution? Here was occasion to exercise discretion and, in so doing, commend her wit to her lover. Reproaches—entreaties—endearments! Had she not learned their utter uselessness? Then, why again essay what had already failed? She pushed discreet inquiries on the subject, and learned, with chagrin, how recent was his departure,—almost as if he had run away from her!

As a matter of fact, he had fled before the invader, deeming discretion the better part of valour, finding his fields without Laura's presence, desert, and all his occupation meaningless. For Horace Metcalfe was very much in love. He went up to London to make certain preparations. He drew up a new will, transferred some of his investments, discovered a tenant to take his house for at least three years. While thus employed, he heard among other news, that Tarifas were doing badly, worse than ever, could not hold out till Christmas without a smash. He thanked his stars he had sold out his interests in them ; felt vaguely that someone ought to inform old Varley.

Meanwhile, with Metcalfe away, with Dolly all discretion, a whisper, idle as a summer wind, coming, nobody knew whence, spreading, nobody knew how, began to flutter the gossips of Darley Bridge. At first it was less than scandal, just a hint.

" They do say—that Mr. Metcalfe—you know the man ? They say there's something between him and Mrs. Armitage. Do you think it possible ? "

The answer was always a scornful negative, but none the less the question was passed on.

As usual in such affairs, and for very obvious reasons, it did not reach the ears of the persons concerned. Curious glances were frequently cast in Dolly's direction, but she, unsuspecting, did not betray herself. Arnold became an object of speculation. His peculiarities did not endear him. Really, with such a man, one could not greatly blame her if she had—but then, of course, the whole thing was impossible. Metcalfe was, fortunately, off the scene; there was no opportunity for prying eyes; and even rumour, without nourishment, must die a natural death. And it actually was in process of so passing, when suddenly something unforeseen occurred, something that horrified all the neighbourhood, and transformed the modest repute of Darley Bridge to an odious newspaper notoriety. And in the glare of that publicity, rumour, no longer anonymous or vague, sprang to the stature of authentic scandal.

It was Mr. Varley who brought this thing to pass, but even before it happened there had been certain warnings.

One of these warnings came towards the end of September, or it might have been the beginning of October. Dolly was never very sure of dates. Annie's successor had by that time been appointed, a stupid, cheerful girl, an obliging creature, who would never poke her blunt nose into other people's secrets.

Dolly was changing her dress for the afternoon, when the girl came stumping upstairs, and knocked at her door.

"There's a young woman called to see you, Ma'am."

"A young woman? Do you mean a lady?"

"No, a woman."

"Where did you put her?"

"Into th' best front parlour."

"The drawing-room Jane. You asked her name, of course?"

"No, Ma'am, I didn't think on."

"You know I've told you . . . "

"Shall I go and ask her now?"

"No, I'm just ready now. But, remember, another time . . . "

Sighing, she went downstairs and entered the drawing-room.

"Annie!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? You don't expect me to give you a character?"

"I've no need for a character, thank you," Annie replied. "I'm married now."

"Then, what have you come about?"

Annie shuffled a little, moving from foot to foot. Her furtive eyes wandered all over the room, and finally settled, defiantly, on Dolly.

"I'm in trouble, Mrs. Armitage. That's what I've come about. My husband, he's had the push, he's out of a job, and there's a baby coming early in the year."

"A baby . . . Oh, but that's impossible! Why, you weren't married till August."

"Never mind that. It is not marriage that matters, but what comes before it."

"Annie!"

"I don't think you need grudge me, Mrs. Armitage. I never mentioned those long walks of yours, though they let me in for a lot of extra work, when I could have done nicely with a little rest . . . Bless you! Don't be so frightened! You knew I knew all about it! From the day he kissed you in this very room. And long before that I saw how things were shaping."

"Go!" said Dolly, sick, shaken and white, but clinging desperately to her dignity.

"Go! You bad woman!"

"Who are you calling bad woman, I'd like to know? If he did give me a green gown by the river, he married me, did not he? More than your gent could do!"

"I have told you to go."

"You'll be sorry if I do. Who's to say I shall keep quiet any longer? What's to make it worth my while? Why, people are setting their heads together already; over you and him I mean. I've only to say a word, it will all be out; and everyone ready to believe it too."

"What do you want?"

"I want twenty pounds to do me comfortably."

"Twenty pounds? Impossible."

"Let's call it thirty then."

"Are you mad?"

"Not at all. You can pay me by degrees—five pounds a week. That is not anything to you, I'm certain. If *you* can't make it convenient, I'm sure he'll be delighted."

"*He?*"

"Mr. Metcalfe. Oh, dear, no, not Mr. Armitage, ma'am! I would not trouble Mr. Armitage, only as a last resource, if I was desperate."

"I don't know how I'm to do it! I've no money of my own, and my husband just gives me a housekeeping allowance."

"Just like his meanness! I'm sure I don't blame you at all for wanting a change."

"If I give you five pounds to-day, I shall have to sell some of my jewellery to repay it."

"Just as you like, Mrs. Armitage, of course; but *I* think Mr. Metcalfe ought to help you."

In the end, not only was the money paid, but Dolly even consented to sign a paper, promising to pay the twenty pounds in four instalments. The whole thing was such a ghastly, impossible nightmare, that she did not feel, in so doing, committed to anything. She thought she must presently wake. How to raise the money was at first a torturing question, but after a while she thrust it from her mind. Even had Horace Metcalfe been at home, it was doubtful if she could have asked him for it. Not only fear but delicacy would have restrained her. To have money from him would have seemed degrading.

Meantime, Metcalfe himself was pining in exile. He had finished his business, completed his arrangements. He longed to see Laura, he had several matters to attend to at Ellesmere Road. His precious collections must be safely stored; his private papers given to his banker's charge, and all preparations made for a lengthy absence. He returned, some days after Annie's visit to Dolly, and on Sunday presented himself

at Cavendish Chapel; whereby two hearts were fluttered with emotion.

Laura had forbidden him to write and was, therefore, unprepared for his re-appearance. She learned, next day, he had called while she was out. She was much annoyed by his flagrant disobedience, and though longing to speak with him, refrained from writing.

On Tuesday morning she had an ardent letter, begging that she would meet him in Darley Wood. She knew his fever as one heightened by abstinence. She replied, bidding him observe the bond.

"Why don't you devote yourself to amusing mother?"

Piqued by her coldness, wounded in his conceit, he sulked, and vowed he would take her at her word. He sent Dolly a letter, typewritten and unsigned, appointing hour and place of rendezvous. When the poor woman read it, she knelt by her bed and thanked God for this great mercy..

Mr. Varley meanwhile, had brought off

his great sensation, the sensation which eclipsed its predecessors, which was to establish his claim to lasting memory—Mr. Varley had disappeared.

Disappeared! It was not so simple as it sounds. An elderly gentleman in a black and white check suit, a grey felt hat and patent leather shoes, and a gardenia in his buttonhole, is not, after all, an inconspicuous object; especially when he mutters to himself, and shakes his head at imagined contradictions.

Some days before the event, he had seen his lawyer. So much he had told old Letty, his housekeeper. He had come back from the interview depressed, talked of economies, of poverty, and cried a little in a childish way, that had made the old woman exquisitely sad. She had comforted him as a nurse might comfort a child, told him she had a little bit put by; they would go and live together in the country.

Monday evening he spent in going through his papers; ordered his hot bath for half-past ten, and went to bed and slept as usual.

When she took his breakfast into the morning-room, she found him, with the paper in his hand, shaken and blanched, with terror in his eyes. He had just received a blow, a double blow. His former wife had married Mr. Brentnall, and Tarifa Tramways had gone into liquidation. Both events had been foreseen, but the blow was none the less heavy. The publicity of his loss seemed to appal him.

"I must get out of it, Letty," he kept saying. "Creep away like a hurt rabbit to its burrow."

He had cried a great deal, and not taken any breakfast. The old woman had slipped away to call the doctor. When she returned, Mr. Varley had left the house.

The police were informed, the railway station was patrolled, the ponds were dragged—no trace of Mr. Varley could be found. It had happened on Tuesday; Wednesday was a blank; by Thursday the Darley Bridge Mystery was in the London papers.

On Thursday afternoon, by his own arrangement, Horace Metcalfe was to meet

Dolly in Darley Wood. He set out in good time, carrying his killing-bottle; he meant to employ half an hour before her arrival in gathering specimens for his collection. In another week it would all be packed away.

The impending interview, brought about by himself, excited in him very conflicting emotions. Of what nature was it to be? A renewal, or a conclusion—a *da capo*, or a *finale*, as he expressed it.

Remembering and resenting Laura's snubs, her coldness and disdain of his approaches, he was not unwilling to be smiled on for a change, to have a sympathetic, kindly hearing. But one thing was very certain, whatever the situation, he must control it, and control it firmly. There must be no rhapsodies of middle-aged emotion. Autumnal tenderness should be the note; admission of the vanished flower, acceptance of the yellow leaf. With this happy simile flattering his tongue, he entered Darley Wood, a coppice little frequented, though lying within half-a-mile of the main road.

The coppice filled up a sudden dip in the

landscape, and, following the course of a scarcely perceptible stream, formed a kind of oasis of bosky green in a wide extent of arable land, now fallow. Its value was reflected in its name. In no other surroundings could it have passed for a wood.

It was composed almost entirely of beeches, magnificent trees, whose pillar-like grey trunks rose, elegantly tapering to a dome, transformed by October to a filigree of gold. Underfoot the grass was coarse and yellowing, mixed with a quantity of russet-coloured bracken. A narrow pathway skirted tangled undergrowth, great ivy tods, dark-leaved and richly berried, masses of briony and eglantine, nightshade and honeysuckle. Rose-campion lingered still in open spaces; lords-and-ladies flaunted garish splendour by the stream; in the ragged hedge, where the leaves had turned dull purple, the guelder-rose displayed its wax-like clusters. Over all the sky, of a tender, plaintive blue, seemed to stoop, compassionate, towards the drowsy earth, falling asleep after much child-bearing.

At the entrance to the coppice, Mr. Met-

calfe set to work. In a very few minutes he was so absorbed, that the thought of Dolly's arrival served to annoy him. He proceeded slowly down the narrow path, his eyes on a manual of natural history, his mind entirely bent on specimens, when suddenly he tripped and ignominiously did fall. So great and unexpected was the shock, so violent his encounter with the ground, that he sprawled for a moment, helpless, hurt and dazed. On rising he saw, tossed to some little distance, his manual, broken backed, and his killing-bottle, shattered. He ran to retrieve the débris, cursing his luck, and still considerably out of breath and shaken. Then it struck him to wonder what he had fallen over. He turned to see what had tripped him so adroitly. And he saw a foot protruding over the path, a foot which did not budge as he stared at it; a neat, well habited foot in a patent leather shoe, showing a dark silk stocking below the trouser edge. The trouser edge was a check, a black and white check. Mr. Metcalfe stood motionless, staring at that foot, and did not know that

his eyes were fixed and glassy, and that drops of sweat were forming on his brow. All the rest of the sleeper, who lay thus with foot extended to trip the passer-by, was concealed from view by a monstrous tangle of nightshade, on the topmost twig of which a redbreast fluttered, cocking a watchful eye at Horace Metcalfe.

And still Mr. Metcalfe waited motionless. Perhaps he expected the sleeper to arise, and offer apologies for the accident. And yet there was an instinct in his blood, which had driven him fleeing, desperate from the place, had the foot, on which his gaze was rivetted, ever so slightly stirred.

With infinite slowness and deliberation, Horace Metcalfe rounded that nightshade bush, and looked down at Mr. Varley, lying very quietly as if sleeping. His hand was under his cheek, he appeared contented. A shrivelled gardenia clung to his buttonhole. How had he failed to see him earlier? Mr. Varley had chosen a sheltered resting-place. On the other side, a luxuriant ivy-tod screened him alike from winds and curious eyes.

As Horace Metcalfe stood there, breathing short, the robin, grown fearless, lilted its brave notes, autumnal sweetness challenging death and change. And slowly, dimly, into Metcalfe's mind came a confused remembrance of some lines he had once read, and could not for his life remember where:

"Call for the Robin redbreast and the wren,
Since they with—something—leaves do cover
The friendless bodies of unburied men."

No, that was not it exactly. Where *had* he read it? He felt it was so appropriate to the case. It seemed of vital importance that he should remember . . . .

Then looking up suddenly, he saw Dolly coming towards him. He woke with a shock of horror from his trance. He tried to lift his hand, to warn her back. Confused, bewildered, she hastened her approach, saw the distended horror of his eyes—and then —one glance sufficed! She rent the silence

with shrill, piercing cries, that drove the startled robin from his spray, and echoed over the wide deserted fields. She ran and screamed, and fell and screamed again. The labourers, hurrying from the untilled field, found her in wild hysterics in Horace Metcalfe's arms.

She was much too ill to attend the coroner's inquest; which, in view of the fact that her evidence was not vitally important to the case, proceeded on its usual course without her. The case was very simple, very clear; the usual overdose of veronal, that sweet-named antidote to carking care. Mr. Metcalfe's meeting with Mrs. Armitage and Mrs. Armitage's fit of nerves were mere side issues, and as such dismissed.

They were not so dismissed by the neighbours of the pair, for whom the simple facts did not suffice. They embroidered, magnified, even invented details. And they deeply regretted Dolly's indisposition, not from any charitable motive, but because it deprived them of the spectacle of herself and Metcalfe, publicly confronted.

Metcalfe himself called on Arnold Armitage, and gave what seemed a straightforward, plain account of his quite accidental encounter with Mrs. Armitage; a statement which Armitage received without any comment whatever, thereby rendering Metcalfe most uneasy. He had impressed on Dolly the need for absolute silence, but in her agitated state of nerves, he had not been able to tell if she understood the injunction. She had, in fact, obeyed him implicitly, refraining from self-defence or explanation, and this course, though prompted mainly by her fears, was doubtless the most discreet she could have adopted. The fact that Arnold did not question her was a relief. She knew nothing of his interview with Metcalfe, or his very silence would have roused suspicion. Sometimes she found his heavy gaze upon her, his sombre eyes fixed on her flushing cheeks; but she met them, and read no fearful question in them, no killing doubt, no furious jealousy. She began to despise him—so easily deceived!

While she lulled herself in false security,

those Furies which attend on broken vows, reminded her she enjoyed it but on sufferance. In the stress of events, a fortnight had gone by, a fortnight in which her debt had been neglected. At the end of that period Annie grew impatient. She wrote. Her letter was not a masterly composition, but its very uncouthness terrified the reader. She was ill when it came, and could not convey the money. Moreover, she knew not how nor where to obtain it. The first five pounds had left her sadly crippled. As for selling or pawning her small stock of trinkets, she was ignorant how to begin the enterprise. After racking her brains for an answer to the enigma, she adopted, surely a primitive solution—she consigned the alarming letter to the flames.

Under such conditions, Laura came of age. Her birthday passed with little ceremony. The girl desired no family rejoicing. Her mother's condition, now only too apparent, moved her to pity, yet strengthened her resolution. She felt that her marriage with Metcalfe would serve to end a situation

grown intolerable ; set her mother free from a ludicrous position, and turn the laugh of the gossips against themselves. For surely, a man may walk with his future mother-in-law ?

None the less, as the year descended into Autumn, bringing the crisis of her fortune ever nearer, the girl's brave courage also waned and flagged ; her young cheek hollowed, her fresh colour faded. Cousin Martha, coming over for a day, commented somewhat sharply on the change, and bade the girl pack her box and go with her to Fernhead for a breath of Moorland air.

" In a few days," Laura answered, " I may arrange it. Do you think, mother, if I were to go the first week of November, you could look after Grandpa in my absence ?"

" Of course," said Dolly. " You must get away. I have felt for some time that a change was necessary."

Her words, in Laura's hearing, rang prophetic. She watched Cousin Martha fussing about the room, setting everything right,

turning everything upside down, and making her caustic comments on all the world. And she felt a sudden pity flood her heart for the multitude of wasted, sterile lives, with all their lovely promise unfulfilled; the lives that go down into darkness, unregretted; the souls that strive against their destiny; the thorny briars that might have bloomed with roses; for the last handful of oblivious earth, and the sad *hic jacet* of a moss-grown stone!

"How strange," she thought, "I shall never see her again. She will never forgive me what I intend to do. And when she is dead, I shall remember her, and be sorry, because she never really lived. How strange it is. Shall I ever understand?"

XIII.

THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL

On the pretext of a visit to Cousin Martha, Laura packed her box without attracting attention. Metcalfe procured her a ticket, dated in advance, and made arrangements for the impending journey. He was to go up to London the night before, and meet her on her arrival at St. Pancras. She permitted him a final interview, a hurried and rather embarrassed interview, in the course of which neither referred to recent events.

On the morning of the day fixed for his own departure, Metcalfe ran into Dolly at the turning of the road. He was then on his way to order a cab for the evening and felt the encounter most *inopportune*.

Her pathetic, tormented and unhappy air struck through his egoism with reproof. She looked at him, mute, as a dog might

regard a master from whom a caress or a kick might be equally expected. Two days before, she had had yet another letter, an angry, menacing letter, reviving all her fears. She looked at him wistfully, longing to speak of it, to tell him how much she suffered for his sake. But she saw he was in a hurry; she understood. She would have passed, apologetically, had not his uneasy conscience prompted him. He knew he had wronged her, and meant to wrong her further; he knew that after his object had been achieved, he could never look her in the face again. But like most egoists he must have the word of pardon, a kind of licence to obliterate the past, and make future transgression easier. He humbled himself to plead, and she was touched.

"Only trust me," he said, "and all will yet be well. In a very short time all will be clear to you. You will know that your welfare must be precious in my eyes; you will understand how dear you must be to me. But it's time our friendship was set on a permanent basis, above the reach of

idle scandalous tongues. Believe me, that will be my earliest care."

"I have always trusted you," said Dolly sadly. "What do you mean to do?"

"Patience! A little patience!" he answered vaguely. Then, pressing her hand, "Have faith in my good will!" He fell into his rôle of easy patron. "Trust me! Remember, I am at your service. Rely on me in all emergencies."

She laid some comfort to her aching heart, while he returned to pack his Gladstone bag and make his final arrangements for leaving home.

In the evening, Laura went round to Fotheringay Villa. It was understood she went next day to Fernhead. Her manner was gentle, listless and subdued. Her need of a change of air was evident. She was affectionate beyond her wont; to her mother especially tender and attentive. Even Patty was spared the sharpness of her tongue.

As the family sat down to supper, the curtains drawn, the fire crackling on the

hearth, there had been presented to any onlooker, a perfect picture of domestic harmony, security and peace. Mr. Armitage sat sideways in his chair, stirring his cocoa and reading the evening paper. He read, with fervour and harsh-voiced approbation, a recent speech on Disestablishment. Harold, bent forward, followed the argument, a certain fanatic glow in his sombre eyes. Patty and Frank conversed in undertones The kettle sang softly on the spirit-lamp, the cat purred loudly and cheerfully on the hearth-rug. Dolly, her eyes fixed on her husband's face, leaned back, abstracted, dreamy and absorbed.

Laura looked on the scene—already out of it. To-morrow it would be impossible. To-day it reminded her of a glassy sea; a treacherous calm, concealing below its surface engulfing shoals, cruel and pitiless reefs, and the torn ribs of gallant enterprise. But were it otherwise, would life be possible? Through all her conflicting emotions she marvelled at it—this power of keeping up appearances, this miracle of quiet self-

restraint, the smiling mask which mocks the spiteful fates.

While she brooded, far away a whistle sounded—intense, plaintive and shrill. Her father put down his paper and glanced at his watch.

"That will be the night express for London."

She thrilled, and a sudden silence fell on all, as thought and hearing followed the racing train, the flashing rows of light, the thunderous wheels—till hearing was outdistanced, left behind, and only fancy, on untiring wings, followed it through the night on far, tremendous journey.

Returning to Silverdale, not without emotion, Laura sat up late, writing a long and affectionate letter to her mother. This letter she stamped, and placed it in her dressing-bag, intending to post it the following night in London. Then she went to bed and lay awake till morning.

Immediately after breakfast, her cab drew up at the door. She took farewell of old Mr.

Armitage, returning a second time to kiss him tenderly; drove to the station and took a train into Brockburn. There the London express was waiting, with her corner seat reserved, and a special luncheon basket ordered for her.

A tremendous excitement pulsed in every vein, as the powerful engine drew the train out of the station. Already the great adventure was beginning—adventure fraught with marvel and emotion. Her sensations were too acute for happiness, but she quivered with new, intense vitality, as the train, gathering up speed and impetus, rushed without slackening past Darley Bridge, past all familiar landscape, on to the unknown.

It were interesting to pursue this journey to its close. Suffice it to say, Metcalfe was waiting to meet her at the station, and drove her at once to the Charing Cross Hotel. They were married early next morning by special licence, and immediately afterwards took their leave for Paris. So Laura passes from this history. Whatever road may claim her, the Rut knows her no more. She always

despised it, now she has left it for ever, on the old unending quest of El Dorado.

On the very morning which witnessed Laura's departure, even while her cab conveyed her to the station, a terrible scene was in progress at Fotheringay Villa. Among Mr. Armitage's numerous letters was one addressed to him by an unknown hand. The envelope, crumpled, smudged, of tawdry air, attracted his attention at the outset. He made one of his laboured jokes and passed it to Harold.

"Nice, tidy handwriting for a Bank clerk, eh? Read it up. Let's hear what's in it."

Next moment he saw his wife turn very white. Her eyes were fixed on his face, her mute lips moved. Startled, he asked her if she were not ill, and urged her to go to her bedroom and lie down. With tottering steps she rose and left the room, leaning on Patty's arm.

Harold meantime had opened the fatal letter. His colour also changed, he hesitated.

His father leaned over the table and took the letter out of his trembling fingers. He read it, flushed darkly, and slowly rose from his chair. As he went to the door, Harold interposed himself.

"It's blackmail, Father."

"You need not tell me that."

"What are you going to do? You don't believe it? Father! She's ill—you won't—"

"Out of my way, lad."

He went to Dolly's room.

She was waiting for him, motionless with fear. Patty knelt by her, clinging to her hand. Her husband entered with dreadful quietness, holding the letter in his outstretched hand.

"Send the child away," he said.

Patty rose, and left the room. He shut the door.

"You know of this?"

She tried to speak, and failed.

"Don't deny it. Here is your signature enclosed."

Again her dumb lips moved.

"Who is the writer?"

"Annie."

"Who? What Annie? The girl we had in our service?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"It's true—I suppose—what she says? But, of course, it's true. You would not have paid her else—would not have signed . . . True! My God! I have known it all along. You! You! My wife! The mother of my children! That man's mistress! Don't—don't lie to me! No better than a harlot in the streets."

The very extravagance of the charge revived her.

"His mistress!" she cried. "Oh God, I wish I were! Yes! I am his—do you hear me, you dull man? I belong to him, I love him, soul and body! I'm tired of this old, endless drudgery. I'm tired of your face beside me, wake and sleeping. I have never loved you—never, never, never!"

"Ah!" he cried. "You—you—"

He felt a sudden impulse of murderous rage, he dared not remain any longer in her presence. She wondered to see him swiftly

quit the room; to hear him get hat and coat and hasten from the house.

Blind fury and outraged honour prompted him to seek the enemy who had done this deed. Arrived before Metcalfe's door his hot mood ebbed away. All the blinds were down, the house was very quiet; it had an uninhabited, empty air. In reply to his ring, a caretaker came to the door. She told him Mr. Metcalfe was away. She expected new tenants coming in a week. His solicitors would forward any letters. He listened—everything seemed like an evil dream. He made a mental note of the solicitors' address.

Now what course were wiser to pursue? Go home and interrogate Dolly? To what end? She had confessed her guilt and gloried in it . . . She had never loved him, never, never, never! He shrank from entering his home again. He longed to get away, to think things out! How monstrous that such a fate should fall on *him*—a God-fearing, sober man! How had he deserved it?

While yet he hesitated where to turn, he heard the whistle of a distant train. Life-long habit cast the final vote; he unconsciously quickened his pace, and ran to the station. He could shut himself into his private office and think, and discuss—no, he could not discuss the affair with Harold.

Dolly meantime had heard him leave the house, followed presently by Harold and the others. The children had not come to say Goodbye . . . they might have done so! The place was very quiet.

She felt alone, incredibly alone! Cut off from all her world, her own past life, a ghost deserted in some shadowy limbo. She sat in a daze, her fingers numb and chill, dimly revolving in her puzzled brain what thing were best to do. There was only one thing to do—she must go to Metcalfe, throw herself on his mercy, his compassion, make return to her dead life impossible. He had bidden her trust him and rely upon him, appeal to him in all emergencies. That was but yesterday—Could he have foreseen?

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I do trust you, dearest Horace; I will take you at your word."

She began, mechanically, to collect a few belongings. She took five pounds out of the housekeeping purse, resolved to send it back, as soon as possible. It occurred to her that had she been really a housekeeper, an upper servant in Armitage's house, she would have had some money put aside, after these many years of faithful toil.

She wrote a note to her husband, and quietly left the house. Following in Arnold's steps, she proceeded to Ellesmere Road, only to make the same discovery. She wrote down the address he had left with the caretaker,

Archer & Turnbull,
Solicitors,
Lincoln's Inn Fields,

then, without hesitation, took the next train to Brockburn. She waited almost an hour for the London connection, a stopping train, that idled at every station on the route, and brought her to London when the streets were

lighting up. By that time, exhausted, chilled, half fainting for lack of food, she had no courage, no initiative left. A coffee-room on the station tempted her, but she dared not loiter, so urgent was her business. She drank the coffee standing, and hastened on her way. Asserting her will in a last, tremendous effort, she asked a cabman to take her to some hotel, quiet and cheap, not far from Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"I suppose," she thought, as she settled herself in the cab, "it will be country there."

She closed her eyes to the turmoil of the streets. London roared round her like a ravening sea, sprinkled with fires of phosphorescent splendours. She was nothing, less than nothing, drifting flotsam.

The cab, pursuing its even, ambling pace, drew up at last before a dingy portal. She opened her eyes and wondered why they had stopped. Cabby, descending, put his head inside the door,

"I think this'll do for you, Lady—Temperance House—very cheap, respectable and central."

"But," said Dolly faintly, "I wanted something quiet! Near Lincoln's Inn Fields, you know."

"Could not be quieter than you will be here; only five minutes from this, is Lincoln's Inn."

"Very well," said Dolly, loath to quit the cab, and viewing the dubious curtains with distaste. "I suppose you are sure it is quite respectable?"

Wearily she and her bag mounted the stairs, to find at the top of the house a tiny bedroom, commanding a view of housetops. She instinctively drew her finger over the sill, and mutely contemplated the results.

"That's nothing, Madam," said the chamber-maid. "We can't avoid the blacks, but I'll get a duster, and bring you some hot water if you wish."

In her absence, Dolly turned back the counterpane. The bed at least was clean, well-aired and comfortable. Suddenly she felt a desire, an almost invincible desire, for sleep. She thrust it away from her with all her might, feeling that every hour

was of importance. She must find her way to Lincoln's Inn Fields at once. She tidied her hair and washed, and went downstairs. The young lady in the office gave her very full directions, and a little cheered by the nearness of her goal, she set forth upon her quest.

Once more the roar of the streets enveloped her. She was utterly confused, and lost her way. Although within ten minutes of the address, she spent almost half an hour in finding it. A clerk was leaving the office as she arrived. Mr. Archer, he said, had been gone an hour or more, and Mr. Turnbull had not been there all day. He could not give her any information, though he happened to know Mr. Metcalfe was in town. Perhaps she would call again to-morrow morning; say about ten o'clock.

She thanked him and returned to her hotel, walking very slowly and swaying as she walked. She felt she must eat or faint from inanition. She ordered fish and tea to be sent to her room, then noting that this entailed an extra charge, went all the way

downstairs to take her meal in a funereal, stuffy coffee-room. Heavy red curtains draped the grimy windows, the lower portions of which were covered with fine, wire gauze. An endless stream of traffic passed the door, like some fantastic pageant in a dream.

After tea she went to her room, her small dark room, the quiet of which was balm to her tortured nerves. She had no means of passing the tedious hours. She dared not encounter the tumult of the streets, and had brought no book with her. She went to bed. As she slipped down the long, dim galleries of sleep, her daughter, in another hotel bedroom, arranged her toilet for the Opera.

Long hours of complete forgetfulness lulled her exhaustion, and prepared her for the ordeal of the morning. She woke with a start in the gloom of London November, asking herself in a panic what had happened? Then she remembered and lay back again.

It was early yet; the whole house seemed asleep. She was thankful to rest, to consider what lay before her. Her eagerness

had gone, her courage ebbed. She was uncertain of the wisdom of her action, of the reception Horace would accord her, uncertain even of her own desires. The sad grey morning hour is not the hour of courage.

She rose at eight and dressed herself carefully. After breakfast she held the paper for half an hour and tried to read. Then, with beating heart, she set out on her adventure.

When she reached the lawyer's office, Mr. Archer was engaged; Mr. Turnbull was expected any minute. She sat down and waited, drawing heavy breath.

At the end of ten minutes the outer door was opened, and Mr. Turnbull, bowing in his transit, passed through the clerk's room on his way to the inner office. A junior clerk descended from his stool, wrote Dolly's name upon a slip of paper, and disappeared into Mr. Turnbull's room. Next moment Dolly was ushered into his presence.

All her courage fled; she could not speak a word. Mr. Turnbull considered her attentively, and concluded the business to be of a

painful nature. He bade her be seated, and waited for her to recover confidence.

In a voice that trembled with anxiety, she asked him to be so kind, so very kind, as to give her Horace Metcalfe's present address.

"I fear that I am hardly at liberty to do that, but any communication you wish to forward . . . "

"Oh, no! It is not a question of writing to him! I must see him—let him know that I am here. I assure you, it's important, most important."

Mr. Turnbull shook his head.

"I am very sorry. It is against our rules to give a client's address. But any message you care to leave with me shall reach him the very first moment possible."

She replied with a little inarticulate moan, wringing her hands.

Mr. Turnbull, watching her, grew very thoughtful. He picked up the slip of paper laid on his desk, and meditated on coincidences.

"It's odd," he thought, "that the name

should be the same . . . There's not much likeness though."

Aloud, he said, speaking kindly,

"You want to see him? But that, you know, is quite impossible."

"Impossible, when he is in London?"

"He is *not* in London."

"Your clerk assured me . . . "

"He had no business to do so. Mr. Metcalfe left London this morning, with his bride."

"His . . I don't understand you . ."

He turned his eyes away.

"I don't think I am breaking any confidence. I was present this morning at Mr. Metcalfe's marriage . . . Really! . . Really! My *dear* Mrs. Armitage—Now, don't!"

Mrs. Armitage had fainted.

Before Mr. Turnbull could ring for a glass of water, the clerk, tapping discreetly at the door, presented himself with another slip of paper. Seeing a swooning lady in Mr. Turnbull's arms, he left the door open, and ran to offer assistance; and Arnold Armitage, think-

ing himself announced, followed close on his heels.

At home, in Fotheringay Villa, Laura's letter, posted by Metcalfe the previous night in London, was lying unopened on the table in the hall, when Arnold Armitage brought back his wife.

Arnold Armitage had acted like a Christian. He had forgiven his wife. The primitive man in him longed to strike, to slay; by him the woman was condemned, unheard, to death. The Christian commuted her sentence to one of penal servitude for life.

She was back again, back in the old familiar Rut. She crept downstairs to her room, a guilty, broken woman, afraid of meeting the children she had borne. One communication only had passed between her and her husband since leaving London. It was in a whisper, as she had crossed the threshold,

"May I sleep in the spare bedroom, for to-night?"

And he had answered coldly, without emotion,

"I see no need for making any change. We may as well begin as we'll go on."

In the gloom of the bedroom, the curtains yet undrawn, the gas unlit, only the flame of the street lamp reflected on the pane, she sat, with her cold hands clasped on her chill knees, and looked deep, deep, into a bottomless abyss.

She saw the years unroll—an endless vista! She saw herself—the spectre of herself—a shadowy figure on that long and dusty road, mimic the actions, occupations and pursuits that had been hers while yet she really lived; keeping up the show of something dead, long dead; treading the circle of an endless purgatory. And she thought of Death, a deep and shadowy pool, in whose dark waters she might find oblivious peace; Death, ever at hand for those who summon him; but far, how far away from her faint heart and shrinking flesh, which truly longed, and yearned, but dared not act—would surely never dare to act again.

She neither wept, nor moaned, nor wrung her hands; only sat staring vacantly before her.

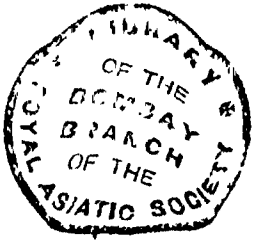
As she sat, forgetful of the flight of time, her door was opened very quietly. She looked up and saw Harold standing in the entrance, grasping the handle, his eyes averted from her.

In a voice from which all quality of youth seemed banished,

" Tea is waiting, Mother," he said. " Will you come downstairs ? "

She sidled past him, not daring to look up, and step by step descended into the pit.

[THE END.]



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